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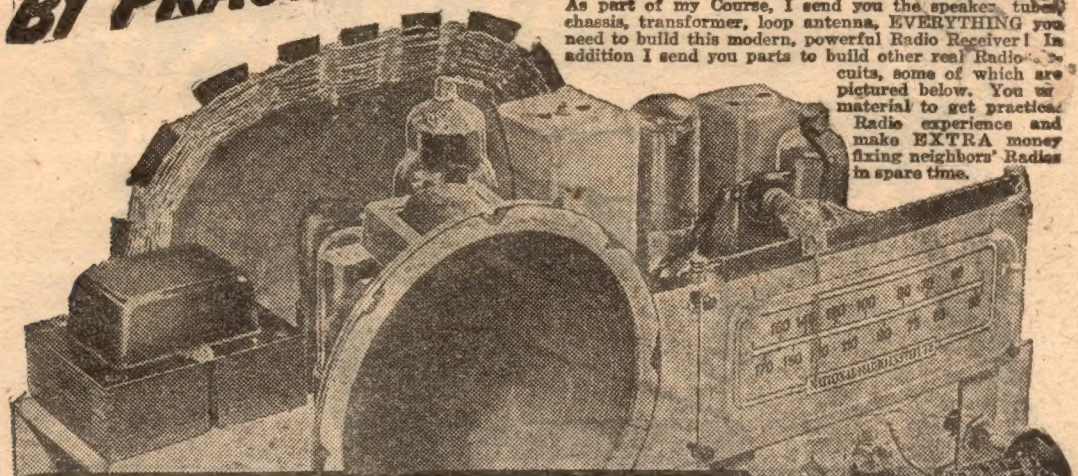
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FURY IN THE

The stagecoach was headed into a mess of trouble on that trip across the desert. Not only were all their lives at stake when the arrows of the Apaches rained down upon them but beautiful Barbara Scott faced a rude awakening from her love dream.

Illustrated by
William Meilink



Ducking the hatchet, Triplett smashed the grotesque face with his rifle and the Indian toppled back.

CHAPTER I

"Dangerous Departure"

TRIPLETT walked slowly back from the livery stable after inspecting the six-horse team he would be taking out that morning and wondered if the Apaches were really up again or if it was just another rumor. He smiled as he saw the broad square figure of Glenway, his guard, sitting on the hotel steps with head in

hands. The sun was rising red, its level rays lighting eastern walls of adobe and wood, leaving long shadows of lavender in the street. The air from the prairie smelled fresh and clean. It was going to be a beautiful day.

Glenway lifted his rough lined face and squinted painfully. "How they look, Trip?"

"Better'n you do, I'm happy to say," Triplett laughed.

Glenway sighed. "Either I'm gettin' old and weak or the whiskey's gettin' "

DESERT

By ROE RICHMOND



powerful strong. The coach in good shape?"

"Prime and spick and span. Fit even for that load we got, Glen."

"That is quite a collection," grinned Glenway. "I reckon young Cahee'll be feelin' lower'n I do this mornin'."

Triplett laughed again. "I hope he didn't get his soldier suit dirty." Triplett was a tall, lean, young man with a gay easy manner, an unconscious grace in every move he made. His bronzed face was keen and merry, the blue eyes had a clear sparkle, the handsome

mouth was made for laughter. He carried his head high, and the hair under the rakish hat was of the same bronze color as his face.

"How did you fare last night, son?" asked Glenway. "Did the lady unfreeze any?"

Triplett shook his head. "None whatever, Glen. She's out here to marry that Salveson and she can't see nobody else. He must be some hombre."

"You mighta done better with the old gal."

"She's more taken up with uniforms and money. She's makin' quite a play for old moneybags Bampton."

Glenway spat expressively. "I'd sure like to make a play for Bampton—with a bull whip! Well, I'm right glad I got a wife and family and my prospectin' days are over."

"We better eat some breakfast," Triplett suggested.

Glenway shuddered and got up reluctantly. "I s'pose so."

In the lobby they met Barbara Scott, the girl who had come West to be married to a man named Salveson. She was small and dainty, poised and assured, with a clean freshness that gave her a quality of radiance. She was a tenderfoot but there was nothing timid or simpering about her. The large hazel eyes looked straight at the world, the burnished chestnut head was imperious, and the pure carved features held character and strength.

"Good morning," she greeted. "Are we going out on schedule?"

"Why certainly, ma'am," Triplett told her.

"That's fine," Barbara Scott said. "I wondered because there is so much talk of Indians around. Do you really think they are on the warpath? Poor Mona is convinced that we'll all be tortured and scalped."

"There hasn't been an uprising since Cochise took 'em on a rampage about a year ago," said Glenway. "But lately there's been talk that somebody's sellin' rifles to the Apaches."

"Good Lord, would any *white* man do a thing like that?" Barbara cried.

Glenway smiled gravely. "There's white men who'd do anythin' for money, miss. And white women, too," he added, as he saw Mona Lowry descending the stairway.

MONA LOWRY was a tall, stately, rather handsome woman of about about forty, who tried to appear much younger. She was attractive, but there was an underlying hardness that could not be concealed, and in unguarded moments greed showed in her eyes and her mouth had a hungry look. Her black hair was only a little flecked with gray, and her figure was still fine and full-blown.

"I think it's very foolish to make the trip if there is any danger of an Indian attack," she announced, her dark eyes flickering at the rangy Triplett and the solid Glenway.

"We can't let rumors hold us up, ma'am," Triplett said.

"How does Bampton feel about it?" inquired Glenway with some maliciousness.

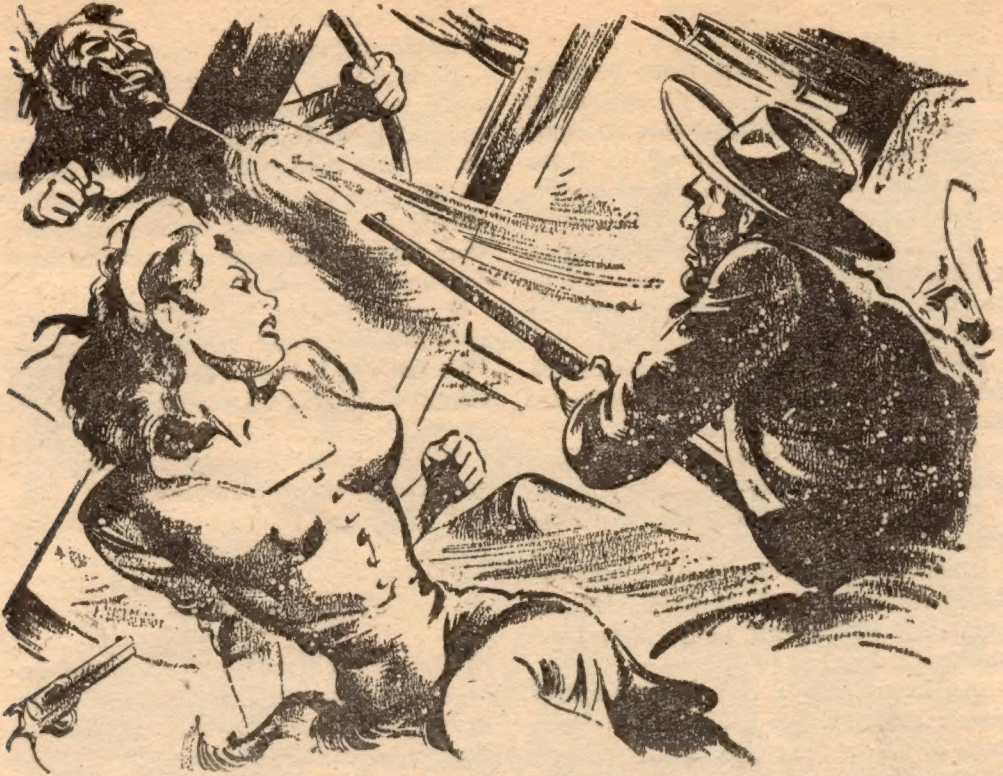
She rewarded him with a bitter cold glance. "Precisely as I do," she declared haughtily. "That's how Bruce feels."

"Well, nobody's obliged to go," Triplett drawled.

It was his turn to take the chilling javelin of her look. "And I'm sure nobody wants to stay over in *this* dreadful place either!" she said. Her disdain was evident in her expression.

Triplett bowed slightly. "All I can say is it's entirely up to the passengers."

"What could be fairer?" asked a flat toneless voice, and Nick Lazor joined the group, bowing to the ladies, nodding to the men, his face pale and expressionless as ever. A medium sized man in severely dark plain store clothes, Lazor looked like a gambler and his long slender hands upheld the part, in harmony with his cold, almost colorless eyes, and his dead-pan visage. He



Tom Trevor triggered his carbine at the big Apache daubed with yellow paint.

passed on into the dining room, unhurried, effortless, and completely calm.

Barbara Scott shivered ever so little. "What is there about that man?"

"I think he's fascinating," Mona Lowry said. "Mysterious . . . but a perfect gentleman." She looked scathingly at Triplett and Glenway with this last.

"A good man to have on your side," said Triplett.

Mona Lowry peered into the dining room. "Why, there's Sergeant Cahee and that poor nice young Mr. Trevor. Let's join them for breakfast, Barbara. Bruce'll be down in a few minutes."

At one table inside Nick Lazor was alone as usual. At another Chip Cahee, in his blue cavalryman's uniform with the gold stripe down the trousers and a sergeant's stripes on his sleeve, was boastfully regaling a quiet young civilian with some of his endless exploits in the realms of women, drink and warfare. Tom Trevor, the listener, was an

earnest youngster from New England striking out to find his fortune in the West.

"Poor Trevor, is right!" Triplett said, as they watched the ladies join the two young men.

Glenway grimaced. "Let's eat somewhere else, Trip."

"Sure," grinned Triplett. "A good idea, Glen."

They started for the door when Bruce Bampton's deep authoritative voice boomed out from the stairs: "Wait a minute, you two! Are we traveling to-day, or are we laying over until the Indians are put down?" Bloated with fat and conceit the rich man contrived to be pompous even in his clumsy descent of the stairway.

"We're travelin'," Triplett said. He didn't feel like arguing.

"But is it safe?" protested Bampton. "I can't afford to run risks. I represent the largest—"

"It's never too safe," Triplett told him.

IN SPITE of his corpulence Bampton had an iron jaw, piercing eyes under craggy brows, and they were strongly in evidence as he advanced on them. "You don't seem to understand my position, driver."

Triplett kept his voice even with an effort: "The stage is goin' out. It's up to the passengers whether they go with it or stay here."

"I don't like your attitude, young fellow!" Bampton said with controlled fury.

"Sorry," said Triplett, wheeling away. "Come on, Glenn."

"I'll turn you in!" threatened Bampton.

Glenway raised his square scarred faced with a grin. "Turn me in too, will you, mister?" he said as they went out the front door.

An hour later a couple of hundred people assembled to witness the departure of the stage-coach. At least three of the six passengers were inclined to regard this as a personal tribute. Mona Mowry, flashing her best smile and waving, nudged Barbara to do likewise, certain that the beauty of two ladies from the East had drawn the motley throng. Bruce Bampton was equally positive that his own obvious eminence had created the attraction, while Sergeant Chip Cahee decided that the gathering was due to the dashing figure he cut in his uniform.

On top Triplett stood up in the boot, a long lithe man as limber as the whip in his hand, and Glenway sat square and solid beside him with a chew of tobacco bulging one leathery cheek and a Winchester repeater rifle across his knees. Triplett cracked his whip over the six horses and the big Concord coach lurched ahead and began to roll. Dust clouded up yellow in the sunlight, and the cheering of the spectators sounded faint and thin and far-away.

In the coach the two women and

Bampton occupied the back seat, and Cahee, Lazor and Tom Trevor faced them from the front.

Nick Lazor gestured back toward town with a graceful hand. "That crowd," he said, voice as expressionless as his pale face. "They came out to see us off, you know why? So that, if we should be massacred by the Apaches, they can say they saw us start the fatal journey."

Topside Triplett had settled down beside Glenway and borrowed a chew. "We got one hell of a load on," he said thoughtfully. "If we should have to run for it."

"Well," said Glenway soberly, "we can always throw Bampton out."

CHAPTER II

Threat on the Horizon

THE sun climbed and the heat increased to an almost intolerable degree, while the dust sifted in to add to the misery of the sweating occupants of the bouncing, swaying coach. The rolling prairie gave way to a desert stretch of burning sand and strange shaped rock formations, where there was no vegetation except the cactus, mesquite, chaparral, and the Spanish-bayonet bush. Winding dry arroyos cut the sun-scorched earth, and red buttes and mesas stood against the molten sky.

Barbara Scott was intrigued by the very bleakness of the desolate expanse, particularly by the fantastic spires and masses of upthrust stone, but Mona Lowry was appalled at this blazing wasteland.

"We only cross the tip of the desert," Nick Lazor explained. "It won't take long."

"First time I ever went against the Sioux was in country like this," Chip Cahee said. "Never forget that as long as I live..." The sergeant went on with his story, but only Mona Lowry listened and she was too ill and fatigued to be

fully appreciative of his valor in combat.

When Cahee had finished Bruce Bampton endeavored to keep the conversation alive in a more practical trend: "Just what does your young man do out here, Miss Scott?"

"He's a trader of some sort, I don't

Triplett's gun was flaming as Samuels tried to urge the Indians on.



understand exactly what," the girl responded. "He wasn't very definite but I know he has been quite successful."

"A good field, there's always money in trading," Bampton acknowledged,

and glared across at Trevor. "And what are you going to take up, young fellow?"

Trevor was shy and embarrassed. "I— uh— I don't just know yet," he

blunder, wishing the pompous fool would shut up.

"Ah, that's where you're making a great mistake, young man," said Bampton. "You'll never get anywhere starting out blindly. Everybody should have a plan, an objective, a primary goal. You're liable to end up sweeping out saloons, Trevor."

The boy flushed angrily but was too inarticulate to retaliate. Barbara Scott promptly came to his rescue: "I'm sure Tom'll never end up that way. I'm sure he'll make good at anything he attempts. You can tell by looking at him." Bampton looked with bushy brows lifted skeptically. Tom Trevor was a fine looking boy with a clean-cut face, mild brown eyes, wavy brown hair, sensitive mouth, and stubborn chin.

"Looks aren't important!" snorted Bampton, his heavy jaw jutting as his mouth clamped down at the corners.

Mona Lowry giggled weakly and eyed the three young men with archness. "I disagree with you there, Bruce."

"Women!" Bampton muttered in disgust and sprawled back in the corner to light a cigar.

Sergeant Chip Cahee immediately launched into a description of various brilliant social functions he had attended recently while on leave in Philadelphia. Cahee was just returning from that leave and had been in civilian clothes until the women joined the party. Cahee was good-looking in a tough arrogant way, and fancied himself as a swashbuckling rakehell, but his determined efforts to impress Barbara had come to naught, and even Mona seemed more attracted by Bampton's wealth than by Cahee's hard young masculinity.

NICK LAZOR was amused by the sergeant as he was by almost everything under the sun. In his mind he tried to decide which of the two, Cahee or Bampton, was the bigger clown. Privately Lazor believed that, of his five fellow passengers, only the naive and sincere young Trevor was worth

knowing. It was part of Lazor's business to size people up quickly and accurately, and he had a well-founded faith in his judgment.

He thought Barbara Scott had possibilities, but they were more or less obscured by her romantic attachment to this Salvason she was going to marry, who was no doubt a thorough scoundrel. The older woman, Mona Lowry, was a common type to Lazor, past her prime but still hungry for romance, envious of youth, proud and wilful, hard and ruthless, greedy for gold as well as love. . . . Bampton was a stupid money-grubber, swollen with self-importance, unscrupulous and treacherous . . . Cahee was a simple young braggart, glorying in his physical strength and the uniform . . . For the two men on top, Triplett and Glenway, Lazor had the highest respect it was possible for him to accord anybody.

They left the strip of desert, and the prairies, sunburnt and barren as they were, seemed fertile and blooming after that wilderness of sand and rock. They stopped at a watering place and everyone got out to stretch in under the cottonwoods, to lunch, drink and refill canteens, and roll cigarettes.

As a safety measure Triplett checked on how the male passengers were armed and found it about as he had expected. They all carried handguns, and Cahee had his Springfield carbine as well. Triplett transferred his Henry rifle from the top to the interior and told Lazor to use it if the occasion arose. The gun under Lazor's left armpit was a .44, so his shells could be used in the Henry, too.

"You expecting trouble?" Lazor asked quietly.

"No," Triplett said. "Just want to be ready in case it comes."

"It wouldn't be so good with those women along."

"We'd be all right if we was ahead of 'em and they wasn't too many," said Triplett. "Glenway can shoot like nobody I ever saw." His blue eyes probed into the colorless ones of Lazor. "If the

worst should happen, Lazor, you take care of the women."

Nick Lazor nodded. "I know what you mean, Triplett. I've seen some of the things the Apaches leave behind."

"Somebody's stirrin' 'em up lately," Triplett remarked gloomily. "Somebody's gettin' Henry rifles to 'em."

"Any idea who it is?"

"Some figure it's an agent named Samuels, but I don't know. We've got some boxes for him on top now. I'd gamble they're Henrys and .44 ammunition."

Nick Lazor smiled bleakly. "It would be a pleasure to get hold of the man who's doing it."

Triplett nodded. "It sure would! Well, it's time to roll."

They started on westward and into the afternoon under the pitiless sun. The undulating prairie seemed endless as an ocean of brown and yellow waves, broken here and there by outcroppings of reddish rock.

It appeared first as a saffron smudge on the southwest horizon. Triplett and Glenway observed it simultaneously, watched it for some time somberly and without comment. When there was no longer any doubt they looked at each other, nodded grimly, and Triplett unleashed his long whip above the six-horse team. The coach jumped ahead and the heat-dazed passengers were shaken and tossed together in their close quarters.

"If they get ahead of us we're done," Triplett said.

Glenway nodded. "Must be thirty or forty in that bunch. Pour it on, Trip."

TRIPLETT crouched in the boot and plied his whip, handling the horses as if they were a single span, and the stage rocketed wildly behind them with the dust smoking and swirling thick.

"We get by 'em we'll run for the Halfway House," said Triplett.

Glenway was calculating distances and angles. "We'll make it if the wheels stay on," he said.

The occupants of the Concord were alarmed at this sudden burst of speed, and the women clung wide-eyed to one another. "Is that damn fool driver drunk or crazy?" demanded Bruce Bampton.

"This is nothin'," laughed Chip Cahee. "You oughta ride with some a them Army teamsters!"

Nick Lazor had spotted the dustcloud unfurling to the southwest and knew what it meant. He said: "Young as he is, Triplett is rated one of the best drivers on the road."

Minutes later Bampton noticed the rising dust off to the south, and his heavy jaw dropped slackly. "Indians!" he wheezed. "Look there! I knew we were foolish to come with those two maniacs."

"You idiot," murmured Nick Lazor, as the women's faces blanched with terror. "They're still a long way off, and there aren't many of them."

Chip Cahee checked his revolver ostentatiously and got his carbine out from under the seat. "The more the merrier," he said, grinning. "Don't you girls worry a bit."

"Why don't we turn back?" asked Bampton. "This is suicide!"

"Shut up," Lazor said flatly. Bampton glared at him but made no reply.

As the coach rocked and jolted at a terrific pace and the dust storm loomed larger on the south, the thoughts of the passengers were widely divergent. Bruce Bampton, of course, thought of the fortune he had amassed and was never likely to enjoy now. Sergeant Cahee, scalp tightening from the familiar prickle of his spine, nonetheless welcomed an opportunity to defend the two fair ladies and demonstrate his prowess at arms.

Mona Lowry wished desperately that she had never deserted her husband and family back in Ohio, and Barbara Scott saw the cruel and premature ending of all her romantic dreams and yearnings, a love destroyed before it was ever consummated. . . . Tom Trevor thought of his folks in New Hampshire, his father and

mother, brother and sister, wondering if they would ever know what happened to him out here on the plains. . . . Nick Lazor gave Trevor one of his rare smiles of reassurance and began to plan for the action ahead.

Up on the seat Triplett and Glenway saw with vast relief that they were not going to be intercepted. The high-flung dustcloud was much closer but almost due south now. The Apaches would have to come up from the rear. With any luck they might be able to beat them off, stay ahead of them, and make the Halfway House. That abandoned adobe structure, backed against a great overhanging butte, was a veritable fortress. A handful of good men could hold off a small army there. It had once been a wayside saloon and gambling house of ill-repute, operated by the man Samuels, who was now an Indian agent suspected of supplying his charges with Henry rifles.

Triplett was on his feet making the whip swish and crack with his long right arm, while his strong left hand and sinewy wrist controlled the headlong flight of six lathered, straining horses. Glenway bit off a fresh chew and looked back along the baggage-piled top to select the place where he would take a prone position for firing when the attack came up.

The heavy veil of dust was to the southeast now but near enough to see the bright ponies and gleaming copper-skinned bodies of the front rank. Some of them had rifles and Glenway spat viciously as he saw them.

"Thirty, I'd say," Glenway told the driver. "Keep 'em runnin', Trip."

Triplett's white teeth shone in his dirt-blackened face. "Give 'em hell back there, Glenny!"

Glenway grinned, nodded, and crawled back onto the coachtop with his Winchester. Over the thundering hoofs and rattling wheels, the creak of wood and leather, the screaming of the Apaches floated high and hideous.

Down below the two women were huddled on the floor. Chip Cahee crouched

at one door with his cavalry carbine, and Nick Lazor waited on the other side with the Henry rifle. Bruce Bampton, helpless with fear, sprawled on the back seat, and Lazor was pleased to think that the man's gross body might at least serve as a shield. Tom Trevor, revolver in hand, sat tensely on the front seat, ready to reload for the others or to fire as the occasion might be.

Barbara Scott lifted a white frightened face. Young Trevor smiled bravely at her, and then he did something he had been wanting to do ever since he saw the girl but never expected to realize: he touched her. He actually stroked her shining chestnut hair, patted her firm shoulder. And the miracle was that she smiled back at him.

CHAPTER III

Indian Attack

THE Indians came up fast and the air was filled with their insane howling, the whine of lead and whir of arrows, the windtorn reports of guns.

Glenway, stretched flat on his stomach, toes hooked into luggage straps, braced his elbows on the jolting wood, sighted carefully, squeezed the trigger, and saw pony and rider go cartwheeling in a shower of dirt. Another half-naked buck went down on the right, and he decided that Lazor must be busy below. . . . The others came on with reckless fury, and Glenway began firing as fast as he could trigger and lever another shell into place. Apaches and horses plunged and rolled screaming in a welter of dust, but the rest came pounding on with a total disregard for personal safety, blood-mad and yelling their defiance even as they died under the deadly rifle fire from the racing coach.

Triplett, riding in a crouch with boots wide apart, socketed the whip that was no longer needed, drew his Walker Colt, and threw righthanded shots back into the frenzied red pack, his left hand

gripping the reins, letting the horses go at full runaway speed.

From their respective windows below Nick Lazor and Chip Cahee leaned wide to pump their shots back at the pursuit,

Trevor reached Cahee first and smashed him squarely on the jaw.



and while Trevor was loading the rifles for them they kept up the shooting with their six-guns. Mona Lowry had fainted on the floor, and Barbara Scott was holding her as best she could in the wildly lurching coach. Bampton lay on the back seat with his face buried in his arms. Bullets ripped and splintered the wood, and arrow shafts thudded into the rear end.

The interior was foul with powder fumes and sweat. The atmosphere was nauseating.

A whistling arrow whipped the campaign hat off Cahee's head, and the sergeant ducked inside and collapsed on the bucking front seat. "I ain't left-handed," he panted. "I can't shoot from that side

nohow." Lazor glanced briefly at him and went on firing from his doorway.... A big Apache daubed with yellow paint surged up on the side Cahee had abandoned. Tom Trevor saw him, jerked the carbine to his shoulder, and triggered. The painted brave pitched from his pony's back with a screech.

"Good boy," said Nick Lazor.

Chip Cahee took the Colt Tom had reloaded for him and went back to his post.

On top Glenway's kneecaps were numb, his elbows raw, and the barrel of his Winchester burned his fingers as he went on pouring bullets into the murderous red horde that was beginning to thin, scatter, and fall back now. They had been unable to get in close, and they had lost nearly half their number. Glenway estimated. Mad as they were with the lust for blood and scalps the Apaches were slowing and slacking off, dropping away as the coach careened on with undiminished momentum.

AND then, rolling on his side to ease the cramped agony of arms and legs as he reloaded again, Glenway looked to the southeast and saw why the warriors were in no hurry. It looked like a dust storm, or the cloud raised by a great herd of buffalo. Heavy and widespread and ominous it billowed up and hung against the sky. There must be hundreds of them, a whole damned tribe.... Scrambling to the front seat Glenway thumped Triplett's back and pointed to the thunderhead of dust.

Triplett's blue eyes narrowed to slits and his mouth tightened. "The horses are blown, too," he said sawing on the reins to slow the sweat-soaked white-lathered steeds. "We'll have to hole up in the Halfway House."

"That was just the advance guard," said Glenway. "And I thought we had 'em licked."

The Indians had dropped back but they were still following, keeping pace with the coach and within striking distance.

Triplett leaned over the side and yelled: "Everybody all right down there?"

Nick Lazor looked out the door. "No casualties—except for some seasickness."

Triplett smiled and waved toward the southeast. Lazor nodded that he had seen what was coming. "How the horses holding up?" he asked.

"They can still travel but they're pretty tired."

"They should be," Lazor said. "They ran a great race."

With Glenway keeping a watchful eye on the Apaches Triplett tried to rest and save the spent horses as much as possible, in case the redmen should rush again. But apparently they were content to stalk the stage and wait for reinforcements. Nearing the Halfway House Triplett touched the team up a bit, and the pursuit promptly stepped up its rate to maintain the distance.

The low compact adobe structure was set against the foot of a massive butte and commanded a broad open slope about three hundred yards above the road. The incline was smooth and gradual with scarcely any cover on it. When he built it Samuels must have expected to be besieged at some time or other, for it was an ideal position to defend.

Triplett made the whip talk and the weary horses responded valiantly. The nearest Indians set up a cry when they saw the coach swerve from the highway and hurtle up the grass-grown drive toward the Halfway House. The redskins came with a rush, but broke and scattered again as Glenway and Lazor opened fire on them. It took all the strength in Triplett's rangy frame to reinsaw the team down in front of the one-story adobe building. Slamming on the brakes he fought the horses to a standstill, and the dust boiled up against the immense rock butte.

"Get the women inside!" yelled Triplett.

Chip Cahee opened the door and stood by. Bampton floundered out ahead of the ladies and bolted through the door into

the adobe house. Barbara Scott and Cahee followed supporting Mona Lowry between them. The Apaches shrieked in savage delight as they sighted the two white women, and a couple of the young bucks charged up the grade. Glenway knocked one of them over, and Nick Lazor blew the other off his pony. The other Indians withdrew to a discreet distance to watch the white men unload the coach.

Triplett held the nervous horses while Glenway unstrapped and unroped the baggage, and Tom Trevor climbed aloft to help him clear the top deck and lower the luggage to Lazor, left alone on the ground as Cahee lingered inside the house with the women and Bampton.

"Cahee!" bawled Glenway. "Get the hell out here!"

The sergeant appeared in the door, hands on hips, insolence on his tough face. "I take orders in the Army, but I ain't takin' 'em here."

"Don't be a damn fool," Lazor said with mild disgust. "Give us a hand here, Cahee."

G RUMBLING Cahee took his place beside Lazor to receive the freight from the topside. When it was cleared Glenway and Trevor swung down to aid in packing it inside the adobe walls. Coming back after the last trip Glenway raised his rugged powder-streaked face to Triplett with the question:

"What about the horses, Trip?"

Triplett was snubbing the reins loosely to the boot. "I'm goin' to turn 'em loose and let 'em run into Almada. They'll follow the road all right. When they get in town people'll know we're held up or dead. If they can't get the troops they'll send a posse out." Triplett jumped down and cracked the whip sharply. The horses leaped ahead and raced down the western arc of the drive with the empty stagecoach.

Triplett and Glenway went inside after the others and barred the heavy door. The interior was bare except for the old bar and a few ruined tables and chairs.

The rear and end walls were solid adobe where the structure was set into the cliff. The open windows along the front were breast-high and deep-silled enough to afford some protection.

Glenway pried open the long wooden box addressed to Samuels, and found a dozen Henry repeater rifles. The smaller crate contained the 44-40 ammunition as they had anticipated. Glenway and Triplett looked at one another gravely. Glenway drawled:

"Well, here's a few Henrys the Apaches are goin' to get the right way, Trip."

The scream of horses brought them running to the westernmost window. In the roadway below the Indians had overtaken the empty coach and were systematically butchering the horses, driving lances, arrows and bullets into them until all six were down in the traces, kicking and screaming and dying in the prairie dust.

On the east the main body of Apaches were drawing closer now, and Triplett and Glenway set about organizing the defense. There were six windows, one for each man—if you could consider Bampton a man. There were plenty of rifles and ammunition, and Barbara Scott volunteered to help keep them loaded if someone would show her how it was done. . . . The Indians, having seen the white women, were bound to attack in full force.

"We can hold 'em off," Triplett said.

"Hold 'em till dark and we're all right till mornin'," said Glenway. "They don't like to die at night."

Sergeant Chip Cahee was instructing Barbara in the art of loading a Henry rifle, and Nick Lazor remarked that they'd better get them all loaded and ready. Mona Lowry lay moaning against the back wall, and Bampton sat with his back against the bar and his large head in his flabby hands. Bampton lifted his heavy-jowled face and glared at Triplett.

"See what you've got us into, you simpleton!"

Triplett smiled tolerantly and didn't bother to answer.

Glenway spat tobacco juice in Bampton's direction. "You got a lot of money," Glen said. "Why don't you buy your way out?"

CHAPTER IV

Adobe Refuge

THE broad plain swarmed with Indians brandishing rifles, bows, spears and tomahawks, gibbering weirdly and gesticulating at the adobe house, a fearsome sight as they worked themselves up for the attack.

In the stronghold there were three windows on either side of the entrance. On the left Nick Lazor held the outside position, Bampton's bulk sagged at the central opening, and Triplett stood nearest the door. On the right Chip Cahee guarded the flank, Tom Trevor was in the middle, and Glenway had the window beside the entrance. Behind them in the center of the room Barbara Scott and Mona Lowry crouched in rickety chairs by a table piled with ammunition. Extra loaded rifles leaned against the wall within handy reach of the men on sentry.

The afternoon was waning when the Apaches finally came charging up the long gradual slope, their blood-chilling screams rising above the thunder of hoofs that seemed to shake the earth. There were hundreds of the half-naked copper-skinned horsemen in an irresistible tidal wave that threatened to sweep the adobe house off its foundation and smash it against the solid rock of the butte.

The men at the windows turned their rifles loose in volley after volley. Ponies and riders went down and were trampled under by their fellows. The defenders emptied their rifles and snatched up new Henrys, while the two women hastened to reload for them. Bullets chewed at the walls and windows, ricocheted into the interior, and arrow shafts studded the wooden door and clattered off the stone. Three and four at a time the

Apaches fell, but the ranks closed and came plunging on in a haze of dust and smoke.

Triplett, firing with automatic speed and precision, thought: O God, there's too many of them! . . . We can't stop them, nothing can stop them. Soon they'll be hacking at the door and clawing at the windowsills. . . . Reaching for another rifle he cursed as he saw Bampton collapsed on the wall beneath his window, unhurt but helpless with terror. The others were all standing firm and shooting steadily, and the stench of powder filled the room. Concentrating on the foremost riders Triplett hammered his shots home and watched the painted red bodies tumble and sprawl in a mad welter of Indians and horseflesh, blood and dirt. Still they came on, driving over the fallen, yelling insanely and obscenely.

They were so close now it was impossible to miss, even for young Tom Trevor, and the men along the adobe wall thought of the two white women behind them and put their anger and hatred into their firing. Thought of the women and children to the south who had died in agony and horror before these red beasts and redoubled their efforts. Almost at its objective the attack was beginning to break and falter, bog down with the weight of its own dead.

A pinto went end over end, catapulting a coppery body clear to the steps of the house, and the body reared up to hurl a spear at Triplett's face and take a hatchet to the door. Triplett ducked quickly and the lance flew past and stuck quivering in the old bar near the back wall. Triplett depressed and angled the muzzle of his Henry, all but blowing the shaven head off the shining shoulders.

OTHER madmen were hurtling at the front of the building now, but Nick Lazor and Chip Cahee caught and lashed them with crossfire from the wings. A few came on in straight, running into blasts from the steady rifles of Glenway

and Triplett. A straggler made his final bid, and Tom Trevor rolled him over under his thrashing pony. Another maniac actually threw himself at Triplett's window, tearing at the rifle barrel until Trip wrenched it free and bashed it into the snarling red face.

But the backbone of the assault was broken now, ripped apart by the rapid fire, and the Apaches were veering aside and circling away, leaving the slope strewn with dead braves and horses. The men inside watched them go and turned wearily and numbly to reach for canteens of water, deaf in the sudden silence, quivering inside as the sweat cooled on their bodies, looking at one another's drawn blackened faces and shaking their wet heads.

Tom Trevor, face white under the sunburn and powderstains, sickened by the slaughter, sat down against the rear wall and stared into space. Nick Lazor was as calm as if he had just finished a friendly game of whist. Chip Cahee swaggered across the floor, grinning and strutting as if he had repulsed the attack single-handed. Bruce Bampton was still huddled under the window he had left undefended, and nobody looked his way. Barbara and Mona, stricken-faced and empty-eyed, managed to smile wanly at Triplett as he said:

"You girls did all right, you sure did."

Glenway took his drink and returned to the window, reloading his favorite Winchester. The broken-faced Indian whom Triplett had struck down came to life and started to crawl blindly. Glenway's rifle roared and the buck flattened under the impact and lay still. The whole slope was littered with brown corpses and dead ponies.

Bampton got laboriously to his feet and stumbled back for a drink of water. "Have they gone?" he demanded, without the slightest sign of shame for his cowardice.

"Not very far," Triplett said. "Go easy on that water. It's got to last us."

"Will they be back?" asked Bampton.



The Colt blasted once more and Salvason reeled to the sand.

"Sooner or later," said Triplett. "Maybe not till mornin'. That's enough, Bampton!"

Bampton paused in the act of lifting the canteen again. "Who are you to give orders?"

Nick Lazor deftly removed the canteen from Bampton's grasp, screwed on the cap, and tossed it on the table. Bampton whirled furiously on him, one pudgy paw half-raised.

"Swing it," invited Lazor. "I wish you would, mister."

Bampton snorted scornfully and turned to the women. "Well, the lovely ladies are all right, I see," he said, reaching for Mona Lowry's arm.

She moved slightly to avoid his touch. "No thanks to you," she said coldly.

Bampton laughed indifferently and lumbered on to sit against the bar.

TRIPLETT shaped a cigarette and strolled back to stand beside Glenway and watch the Apaches on the plain below. Triplett said: "They won't come at us that way again."

"I reckon not," agreed Glenway. "Even Indians ain't that crazy. They'll come crawlin' and snipin' next time."

"Lucky we had them extra rifles, Glen."

"Only thing that saved us. We can thank Samuels for them, and for leavin' this Halfway House here handy. You know, Trip, I heard once that Samuels had a secret back passage outa here. Never put much stock in it but a character like him might do 'most anythin'."

"We can look around anyway," said Triplett. "We'll have time."

"Young Trevor stood up to it like a man," Glenway murmured. And them females sure surprised me some."

Triplett nodded. "He's a good kid. And I figured Barbara had the right stuff, but I kinda thought Mona would wilt down like Moneybags did."

"That Bampton," Glenway said in disgust. "It's too bad we can't turn him loose for the Apaches to play with."

Sergeant Chip Cahee was addressing the ladies: "We're makin' history here! It'll go down with Beecher's Island and the Adobe Walls Fight, you wait and see if it don't!"

Mona Lowry smiled wryly. "I'll take my history in books, Sergeant."

Barbara Scott was far away again, dreaming of Salveson, tall and handsome, dashing and debonair.

Back against the wall Tom Trevor was seeing a little village in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, the familiar streets, stores and houses, the prim white church with its graceful spire, the lamp-light soft and golden in the windows of his own home. That was reality; this whole thing seemed like a terrible dream.

Over by the bar Bampton was think-

ing: If I get out of this I'll see that Triplett and Glenway lose their jobs and damn soon, too.

In the darkness before moonrise the Indians crept up the slope to do some sniping from the cover of their own dead. Once in a while a bullet screeched through a window, but most of them chipped harmlessly away at the outer wall. The men in the house saved their ammunition, firing only when the muzzle flashes showed dangerously close, and then with an accuracy the Apaches could neither match nor comprehend.

There was no concerted rush, and when the moon came up the redskins withdrew out of range. They had lost enough for one day, and their bloodlust cooled in the night.

CHAPTER V

Backs to the Wall

IN UNDER the debris behind the bar Triplett discovered a trapdoor cleverly fitted into the floor boards. He called Glenway, and Nick Lazor came over too. "This may be it, Glen," said Triplett. "Or it may be just a cellarhole. I'll soon find out." They lighted a lantern brought from the stage-coach and lifted the heavy door.

"You ain't goin' alone, Trip," protested Glenway.

"Let me go, Glenway," said Lazor quickly. "You'd better stay here, in charge of things."

"That's right, Glen," agreed Triplett. "You're needed here."

Glenway conceded the point unwillingly and watched Nick Lazor follow Triplett down the ladder into the dank musty darkness. The flickering of the lantern-light indicated an opening to the rear, and they found what appeared to be a natural fissure in the rock. Carefully, scarcely breathing, they entered the tunnel and pursued it back in under the butte, an eerie jagged-walled cavern in which an overwhelming weight seemed to press down upon them.

The light shone on a blank wall ahead and it looked like a dead-end, but moving on they saw that the passage made an abrupt right-angle turn. The faint air currents were evidence that somewhere ahead the tunnel emerged to the open. Warily they picked their way on to another sharp bend in the irregular walls, and there they heard voices before they saw the vague glimmer of light. Swiftly Triplett doused the lantern and they stood in shocked silence in the cold clammy darkness, listening to the murmur that sounded like ghostly voices in a long-forgotten tomb. Then slow step by step they eased forward toward the pale light rays reflected on rock where the tunnel took another twist.

The voices were Indian, and Triplett wondered how they came to know about this secret entrance, and then he heard white men talking and thought at once of Samuels. There were blasted boulders in this last elbow, and beyond it the trail dipped suddenly and opened into a subterranean chamber where the strange conference was taking place. The air was fresher here, and they were obviously nearer the surface. Crouching behind the rocks at the curve Triplett and Lazor peered at the scene below.

There were two white men, a tall one whom Triplett recognized as Samuels himself and a short stocky one who was a stranger. There were five Indians, three with blankets shawled around their shoulders, two naked to the waist.

"You'll have to go and set the fuses, Dobbs," said Samuels, gesturing impatiently. "They don't understand it."

The stocky man, Dobbs, swore with feeling. "Sure, I always get the good jobs."

Samuels laughed. "There's nothin' to it, Dobbs. You'll have plenty of time to get out." He turned and spoke to the Apaches in their own tongue, using his hands freely. One of the Indians seemed agitated about something and kept looking and pointing up the tunnel. He was a big brawny buck with a long bow in his hand. Finally they were ready to

move, and Samuels stepped back out of sight.

"We'd better stop this right here, Trip," whispered Nick Lazor, reaching under his left armpit and drawing the Colt .44, raising himself a trifle to throw down on Dobbs at the head of the party. At that instant the powerful Apache lifted his bow and an arrow swished wickedly up the corridor. Triplett heard it strike the man beside him, heard Lazor's gasping grunt as he swayed back and fell forward onto his knees, and saw the feathered shaft protruding from his chest. Steadying his Colt on the boulder in front of him Nick Lazor fired and the blazing blast filled the cavern. Dobbs went over backwards, threshed violently, and stiffened out.

TRIPLETT'S gun was flaming now, and the big Bowman crumpled against the wall and slid loosely to the rock floor. Lazor's .44 kept roaring and another Indian screamed and fell in the corridor. The rest were fleeing wildly, but Triplett dropped one of them in the chamber below as the lights went out. Somewhere down there Samuels was shouting in hoarse anger, and Triplett knew he was trying to drive the reinforced Apaches back into the tunnel.

"Nick, is it bad?" he asked anxiously.

"It'll do—for me," Nick Lazor said slowly. "Beat it, Trip."

"Not without you." They were both reloading as they talked.

"I can't move, Trip," said Lazor. "But I can hold 'em. Go on back. No need of your getting it too."

"They're comin' again, Nick," said Triplett.

"I'll stop 'em," Lazor said. "Go on, Trip! . . . I'm done anyway. The others need you, boy." Lazor coughed and Triplett heard the thick gurgle of blood, the splash as Lazor spat.

Moccasins scurried and pattered like rats in the dark. Lightning leaped up the passage at them with the deafening thunder of guns, and they fired back as

lead splintered the boulders and sprayed them with stonedust. There were shrieks and howls below, the thud of falling bodies, and the Indians broke and ran again as Lazor and Triplett emptied their six-guns. They reloaded once more with Nick Lazor slowly coughing out his life in the underground blackness.

"Trip—get back to the others," pleaded Lazor.

"They've got dynamite, Nick."

"They'll use it right here," said Lazor. "They'll never get by. Go on, Trip."

"I'll help you back," Triplett said.

"What the hell for? I know I'm done—and so do you." The cough racked Lazor again, and the blood poured from his mouth in a stream. "Please, Trip," he panted. "Go!"

"All right," Triplett said at last. "So long, Nick."

"Get the hell out of here!" Lazor said slowly and distinctly.

Triplett pressed his arm and moved away in the darkness, lighting a match and reaching the next bend in the tunnel. He waited a long time until there was another rush and a burst of shooting, and again Nick Lazor beat them back and the passage was silent.

"You all right, Nick?" called Triplett.

Lazor cursed him and told him to keep going.

Triplett lit the lantern and walked sadly on. He had almost reached the cellar under the adobe house when the earth trembled with a terrific underground explosion, and afterwards there came the roaring sound of an avalanche. For a moment he feared the whole tunnel was going, and he ran ahead and clutched at the ladder like a drowning man. But the deluge was at the other end of the passage only.

Nick Lazor had kept his promise and made them use the dynamite out there. They would never get through now to blow up the Halfway House. . . . Triplett climbed the ladder and saw the anxious faces of Glenway, Trevor, and the others.

"What's all that blastin', Trip?" asked Glenway.

Triplett smiled gravely. "You might say it was Nick Lazor's last salute," he said, and told them how it had been in the tunnel under the butte.

There was a difference with Nick Lazor gone, and they all felt it. The place seemed empty without the calm quiet man with the pale eyes and expressionless face. It was as if several people were suddenly missing.

CHAPTER VI

Desperate Plight

THEY stood the long watches of the cold and endless night in two shifts, Glenway and Trevor on one, Triplett and Cahee the other. The women, wrapped in blankets salvaged from the stage, tried to sleep on the floor. Bampton had attempted to appropriate a blanket for himself, but Chip Cahee had driven him away with rude finality. The awe the sergeant had known for Bampton's personage and wealth was entirely dissipated now, and he would have struck the fat man if Triplett had not intervened.

Once in the night Tom Trevor heard Barbara Scott sobbing quietly, and he moved across the room to comfort her but someone was there before him, Cahee turning with a snarl: "Get outa here, kid! I'll take care a this."

"Go away," the girl said. "Go away and leave me alone."

"Whatsamatter, baby?" asked Cahee, kneeling beside her.

"Leave her alone," Trevor told him. "She doesn't want you." He was half-surprised at his own boldness. His hands were clenched as he stood over them. Chip Cahee looked up in astonishment and anger.

"Why, damn your eyes!" Cahee scrambled to his feet and lunged at the boy swinging.

Trevor took a blow on the side of the head and struck swiftly back, landing hard on Cahee's mouth. Then Triplett

was in between them, splitting them and flinging them back to either side.

"Cut it out," commanded Triplett. "What the hell ails you, Cahee? You'll get all the fightin' you want in the mornin'. Now get back to your post."

"Who the hell put you in charge here?" muttered Cahee.

Triplett took a stride toward him, and Cahee lifted his hard fists. Triplett's long whiplike body poised on the verge of striking when Glenway moved in and clamped an iron hand on Cahee's arm. "Back to your window," Glenway said with gentle emphasis. Cahee looked from one to the other, his face sullen, tossed his head defiantly and stalked away.

Triplett laid a big hand on Trevor's shoulder. "Get some rest if you can, Tom."

"I'm not afraid of him any more," Trevor said, as if talking to himself. "I used to be but not any more."

Glenway laughed softly. "After you get outa this, Tommy, you'll never be afraid a nothin' again."

Triplett walked over to Cahee's window. "We're all in this together, Sergeant," he said. "We've got to get along as best we can. The enemy is out there."

"All right, all right," muttered Cahee, turning his face away.

Triplett returned to his own post on the other side of the door and thought again of Samuels. Now that the renegade had been seen with the Indians he'd be more determined than ever to make certain that none of them got out of this trap alive. Just thinking of the man set the fire coursing in Triplett's veins. Whatever happened he wanted to live long enough to get that filthy renegade under his gun. He thought of all the lives Samuels was responsible for, the torturing and murdering of innocent men, women and children, and the hatred filled him with such bitterness that Triplett spat to clear his mouth of the taste.

Sergeant Chip Cahee was becoming irritable and on edge under the strain.

He was accustomed to organized action with his company, but this was something quite different. . . . He resented taking orders from Triplett and Glenway. The only military man in the group, he, Cahee, should have been in command. He smarted under the indifference of Barbara Scott. Even that tenderfoot Trevor was beginning to stand up against him. . . . An unreasoning hate for all of them welled up poisonously in Cahee. He was glad Lazor was dead. He wouldn't mind seeing the others dead with him. . . . If he could slip away and find Samuels before the Indians got him he might be able to make a deal for his own safety. But it was too long a chance to risk. He'd have to stay here and fight for his life with the rest. Unless help arrived they'd all be dead before long. The Apaches were certain to beat their way into the Halfway House sooner or later, or to starve the defenders out.

BACK on the wall Tom Trevor was no longer thinking of his home in New Hampshire, for all his thoughts were of Barbara Scott. He remembered the fragrant softness of her hair, the way her firmly rounded shoulder felt under his hand. This was an unlikely place for love to blossom, but it had come to him just the same. He visualized her large straight-looking hazel eyes, her lovely red mouth, the delicate chiseled profile, the pure lines of her forehead and chin and throat. Trevor wanted her as he had never wanted anything. If he had to die it was sweet to think he would die with her, fighting for her. . . . He dozed off with a faint smile on his sensitive lips.

In her troubled sleep Mona Lowry was dreaming, and abruptly the dream brightened with golden warmth and she was back home in Ohio with her husband Dick, her two daughters and her young son. "Forgive me," she was begging. "Forgive me, I didn't know, please forgive me. . . ." But the dream darkened and went cold, they could not hear her,

their faces were stony and set, their eyes unlighted by recognition. They didn't know her, they couldn't even see her. . . . "Here I am, here!" she cried, but their ears were deaf, their eyes blind, and she couldn't reach them at all. . . . Mona woke up weeping and shivering on the hard floor, the taste of tears in her mouth, an aching desolate sense of loss in her breast.

Bruce Bampton had his dream too, and in it he was striding forth majestically with a large bag of gold coins in his left arm, and the Indians were bowing and kneeling down to him as he moved amongst them scattering coins with a lavish right hand, the goldpieces spinning and glittering in the sunshine. . . . Then the dream was broken by a terrible blast that tore Bampton in two, the gold turned red and dripping with blood, the Apaches leaped at him with hate-convulsed faces, and Bampton awoke groaning and sweating on the planks with a deep-stabbing pain in his back.

Morning came at last and with it the Indians, skulking and flitting up the slope like brown shadows in the grayness, utilizing the shelter of yesterday's dead horses and braves, running fast and low to the ground, dodging from side to side, crawling like great snakes, firing and coming on to fire again. Hot lead scourged and raked the adobe wall from end to end, probing at the windows, whining through into the interior, ripping up clouds of stonedust and showers of splinters.

There were only four men along the line of defense now, Triplett and Cahee on the left side of the entrance, Glenway and Trevor on the right wing. But with the spare rifles ready at hand their firepower was considerable, and new Indian dead joined the old along the incline as the 44-40's jolted them to the turf.

Having crept as close as possible the Apaches launched a frenzied suicidal onslaught, and for a moment it looked as if they would carry their objective through sheer weight of numbers. But

the four windows went on spouting flame and smoke until coppery bodies lay in ragged winrows across the summit, and the attack was shattered apart and smashed back in complete confusion.

"They're crazy," Tom Trevor said in his awesome silence that ensued.

"Samuels must be drivin' hell outa them," mused Triplett.

Glenway nodded and munched his tobacco. "That—and the womenfolks they know are here."

"There's Samuels now, down by the road," said Triplett, pointing to the tall dark-clothed figure with the white sombrero and white scarf.

Glenway squirted a savage stream of tobacco juice. "I'd rather kill him than a hundred Apaches!"

"He'll stay outa range," Triplett said. "He ducked out last night before we could get a crack at him."

Barbara Scott came to Triplett's side, saying: "Where is this Samuels? I'd like to see what such a creature looks like."

Triplett laughed. "He's a good-lookin' hombre, ma'am. Quite a lady's man, they say."

"Yeah, I saw him dancin' in Almada," Glenway said dryly. "The gals couldn't hardly wait their turn." He gestured toward Mona Lowry. "Your friend there'd call him a perfect gentleman, I reckon."

BARBARA SCOTT was staring silently and intently at the distant figure of Samuels. "Why, he looks like. . . ." she murmured. "It's ridiculous, of course, but he does. . . ."

"Like somebody you know, ma'am?" inquired Triplett.

Just then Samuels removed the white sombrero, and his thick, black, pomaded hair gleamed in the morning sunlight. Barbara Scott went rigid at Triplett's side, her eyes wide and hypnotized, her face drained of every vestige of color and life. "O God," she murmured, swaying suddenly limp and starting to fall. Triplett caught her easily in his long

muscular arms and held her with gentle care.

"What is it?" he asked. "What's the matter, miss?"

Her eyes were closed, her features transfixed with horror, as the others gathered around anxiously. Lifting her tenderly Triplett carried her back to the blankets and lowered her to them, motioning helplessly to Mona Lowry. The woman came quickly and knelt beside the girl.

"No, no, *no!*" moaned Barbara. "O dear God, no! Not that, not ever. . . ."

"Barbara, darling," crooned Mona Lowry. "Tell me, Barbara."

"It's *him!*" the girl cried piteously. "It's Carl—Carl Salveson! He was lying to me all along!"

Chip Cahee laughed aloud with a jeering note of mockery. Tom Trevor spun about and knocked Cahee flat on the floor. The sergeant sprawled there half-stunned, shook his head and yanked the revolver from its holster. Glenway jumped and kicked it out of his hand clattering into the corner. Cahee got to his feet snarling like a cornered animal.

"You're three on one," Cahee said.

"I don't need any help," said Trevor, advancing on him.

Triplett hauled the boy roughly back. "This is no time or place for that stuff. Let's forget it and fight the Indians."

"I ain't forgettin' it," muttered Chip Cahee.

"Well, don't try any shootin' in here, Sarge," drawled Glenway, picking up the gun and handing it to Cahee. The sergeant jammed it back into the sheath and walked away from them.

"I'm sorry, Sergeant," said Tom Trevor, forcing himself to the apology.

Chip Cahee laughed shortly. "If you ain't now you're goin' to be sometime," he promised, and sulked at the far windowsill.

On the floor Barbara Scott was still sobbing that name: "Salveson . . . Carl Salveson." She couldn't seem to get the horror out of her mind.

CHAPTER VII

Offer of Safety

THE day wore itself away with sporadic fighting, mostly at long range. It was dusk when the Apaches tried another headlong assault on foot from the nearest cover. Once again the rapid blasting rifles took their toll from the adobe wall, and more red bodies carpeted the blood-soaked soil. Spewed out of the reeking welter in a final frantic lunge six braves screamed forward with a battering-ram leveled at the door. Leaning from the windows Triplett and Cahee, Glenway and Trevor, concentrated their fire and stripped the pole clean of brown bodies as a tree is stripped of dead leaves by an autumn gust. Dying impetus carried the timber crashing against the door and loosened the rusty hinges, but there was no more muscular motivation to follow up the thrust. The battering-ram bounced back and fell rolling over the riddled corpses of the warriors who had borne it. Flame and fury faded and died along the slope.

The Indians drew back into the gathering darkness, and the men inside the walls relaxed once more, staggering like drunks as they groped for the canteens that swished with near-emptiness now.

Barbara Scott had failed to recover from the shock of recognizing that the renegade Samuels was her fiance Salveson. Mona Lowry had stood alone to the reloading of the rifles, her face showing its true age and Mona not caring, unaware that she was handsomer than ever in her newly-found dignity. Bruce Bampton, lolling under the Apache lance at the mouldering bar, had renounced all interest and participation in the siege.

Another night dragged its interminable length across the prairie, and a sense of hopeless unreality filled the adobe house. Lazor was the lucky one, Lazor was out of this hellish existence. Even Triplett and Glenway came to envy

him as time added its inexorable weight to the torture.

Another morning came gray and ghoulish and without hope, but this time there were no charging Indians. Instead a single arrow whipped in through a window, and dull glazed eyes saw that there was a piece of paper attached to the shaft. Triplett took it off and opened it with numb fingers. He read it aloud:

"If you are ready to bargain \$500 a head will see you safely out of this. To guarantee safe passage you can keep your weapons and I will accompany you as a kind of hostage. The Indians, knowing I will die if they raise a hand against you, will never harm you. Come out with a white flag if you want to talk terms, and I'll meet you. Once the deal is made there will be no trouble. This is my last and only offer."

BRUCE BAMPTON reared up with the first sign of life he had shown since collapsing under the window he was supposed to defend. "Well, well, that sounds fair enough," he said briskly, rubbing his hands and smiling at Glenway. "You suggested that I buy my way out, guard, and now I'll do just that. I believe I have enough money on me to pay the young ladies' way also."

Barbara Scott shook her head. "Not mine, thank you. I'll stay here."

"That is your privilege, of course," Bampton said. "And what about you, Mona?"

Mona Lowry frowned thoughtfully. "Naturally I want to get out of here, but—Well, can you trust a man like that?"

"Not very likely," said Triplett. "He'll take the money and turn you over to the Apaches."

Bampton sneered. "If you had five hundred you'd probably feel different about it, fellah."

"I wouldn't feel any different if I had five thousand," Triplett drawled.

"They must have an idea help's comin' to us," said Glenway. "Samuels wouldn't

make any offer if he was sure of takin' us."

Sergeant Chip Cahee muttered sullenly: "If she don't wanta go I'll go."

Bampton smiled broadly. "I didn't know you had been invited, Sergeant. My invitation included the ladies and nobody else."

"Go to hell then!" Cahee said.

"Bampton, you're a damn fool if you go out there," Triplett told him quietly. "They'll swarm over you before you can fire a shot. They'll cut out your tongue and stake you down on an anthill and maybe build a slow fire under you."

"I don't think so," Bampton said smugly. "Money always talks. Money talks louder than those guns of yours."

Triplett shrugged his wide shoulders. "It's your scalp."

"And I'll have it long after yours is hung up to dry," Bampton said. "Are you coming, Mona?"

"Oh, I don't know," she moaned. "I don't know what to do, Bruce."

"If you'd ever seen what they do to white women you'd damn well know!" Glenway said harshly.

"Don't go, Mona," said Barbara Scott. "Carl must be insane to have sunken so low. How can you take the word of a man that sides with savages against his own people?"

"Well, I'm not waiting all day for you to make up your mind," Bampton said. "I'm going now. Needless to say I'll send help to you as soon as I can."

"Thanks!" Cahee said with bitter sarcasm.

Glenway looked at Bampton. "If you was worth savin' I'd hogtie you here, mister."

Triplett looked down the slope to where Samuels and another white man stood with a group of Apaches. The sun was up now, and the smell of death tainted the morning air. The stench would be terrible when the sun climbed higher and the day grew hot. The Indians had removed some of their dead from the foot of the incline, but those near the crest and just outside the walls

were still there. Triplett stared into the west toward Almada. Rescue would have to come today or it would be too late. The water was nearly gone, and Cahee wasn't going to be any asset for much longer.

Bampton was making preparations for his departure, checking his gun, producing a large white linen handkerchief, and brushing his expensive broadcloth suit. He smiled appealingly at Mona. "You'd better change your mind."

The woman shook her dark head. "No, I'm staying with Barbara."

"Well, I wish you all luck," Bampton said, with false cheer.

Triplett unbarred the door for him. "Keep your gun on Samuels," he advised.

"Don't worry about me," Bampton said loftily, waving a plump hand indifferently in farewell, stepping outside and holding the white handkerchief high overhead.

SAMUELS, whom Barbara had identified as Carl Salveson, paced slowly up the grade with his bodyguard around him. In ten or fifteen minutes, thought Triplett, we'll be hearing Bampton's screams under torture. . . . The man's great bulk moved ponderously away from the house as he stepped carefully around or over the lifeless red-skinned forms on the sparse sunburnt grass. Triplett was shutting the door when a gun exploded from the nearest window on the left, and he looked up to see Sergeant Chip Cahee crouching there with his right arm leveled, his lips drawn back in a ferocious snarl, his dark eyes shining madly. As Triplett leaped toward him the gun roared again.

Tom Trevor reached Cahee first, jerking him back out of the window, spinning him about and smashing him squarely under the chin. Cahee's head rocked far back and the revolver flew out of his hand as he landed heavily on his shoulder-blades. Jumping after him Trevor pinned the sergeant tight to the floor.

Triplett looked out the window and saw Bruce Bampton hunched over and staggering from the impact of the bullets in his broad back, his legs spread wide and sagging until he pitched forward with his face in the dirt. Flinging the door open Triplett sprang out and raced to the man's twitching body, caught him under the arms and dragged him back to the steps where Glenway helped hoist him inside.

Chip Cahee was kicking and struggling wildly to heave Trevor off, but Trevor fastened his fingers into Cahee's hair and hammered the sergeant's skull on the floorboards until he lost consciousness. Glenway grabbed a rope and quickly bound Cahee's hands and feet, looping ankles and wrists together behind his body.

Bampton rolled his eyes up at Triplett. "But why?" he panted. "Why? . . ."

"I don't know," Triplett said. "But you're dyin' easier here than you would've out there."

"Cahee?" asked Bampton, and Triplett nodded. Bampton's flabby hand moved weakly toward his breast pocket. "You—take my—money," he said slowly and painfully. "It'll—maybe help—some. . . ." Blood gushed down the heavy jowls and thick neck. Bampton shuddered, stiffened out, and went limp on the floor.

Triplett took his wallet and gun, tugged the handkerchief from his clinging fingers, and dragged the hulking body out through the door. No use leaving it inside to horrify the women. . . . Triplett glanced down the slope and saw that Salveson and his followers were closer now, mystified by the shooting of Bampton. An idea occurred to him, daring and desperate but worth trying in this dire emergency.

Triplett went back to the doorway and reached inside for his Henry rifle. "Cover me, boys," he said softly. "I'm goin' after Samuels-Salveson."

He was gone before Glenway and Trevor could stop him or utter any protest. With the white linen in his left

hand and the rifle under his right arm Triplett walked out in the direction of Salveson and his henchmen.

CHAPTER VIII

Suspicious Parley

TRIPLETT yelled, "Call off your red dogs. Come and meet me alone."

Salveson spoke to his companions, appropriated a rifle from one of them, and walked on ahead of them up the incline. About sixty strides in front of them he halted: "I'll wait here. You come the rest of the way."

Triplett had stopped when the other did. "Walk with me," he called. "Meet me halfway."

"This is as far as I go," Salveson shouted. "You aren't dictatin' the terms, Triplett."

Triplett laughed. "I'm not committin' suicide either. Come on, man, you ain't afraid, are you?" The renegade refused to advance. Triplett raised his voice loud and clear: "*Salveson!* There's a lady in the Halfway House named Barbara Scott. She knows what you are now, Salveson. Do you want her to see you play the coward, too?"

Even at that distance the shocked transformation of Salveson's features was plainly discernible, and he started on up the slope in long deliberate strides. Triplett moved forward, timing his steps with the other man's but keeping them short. They were within fair rifle range now. Triplett paused again and watched the tall, dark, arrogant figure come on. Salveson halted once more.

"Are you man enough to keep your red hellhounds outa this?" demanded Triplett with all the scorn he could convey.

Salveson snarled back at him: "You'll damn soon find out!"

"Come on, renegade. Just you and me then."

Salveson climbed slowly onward. "Is Barbara really in there?"

"How else would I know your real

name, Salveson?" Triplett laughed at him.

Salveson slammed the rifle to his shoulder and fired. The slug splashed dirt against Triplett's legs as he raised his Henry and squeezed the trigger, his bullet throwing sand across Salveson's ornamented boots. Salveson took more time with his next shot and the lead burned closely past Triplett's ear. Salveson ducked as the .44-40 fairly scorched his cheek in turn, and when another quick shot threw dust into his face Salveson dived desperately for the cover of a dead horse. With Salveson's slugs practically searing his face Triplett slid into the sheltering body of a dead pony. There under cover they emptied their rifles at one another, with most of the bullets sloughing into bloated dead horse-flesh.

Then, as Salveson started to reload his rifle, Triplett left the Henry, hurdled the stiff bulk of the pony, and drew his Walker Colt .44 as he raced down the grade in long leaping strides. Looking up and seeing him coming in that reckless rush Salveson tightened up all over, fumbling and dropping cartridges, finally flinging the rifle down and rearing upright to draw his own revolver.

BUT Triplett's gun was already blazing as he ran, and the first shot smashed Salveson's right shoulder, the second ripped into his body and rammed him backwards in a stilted jerking stagger. Disbelief on his distorted face, Salveson clawed the gun into his left hand and swung it flaming at Triplett, but the bullets either tore up the turf or hummed high in the air. Triplett came to a spread-legged stop, squared away and aiming carefully this time. The Colt blasted once more, and Salveson reeled wildly as the .44 slug crushed his breastbone. Choking hotly and agonizingly, screaming blood like one of his Indians, Salveson rolled back and squirmed out his life in the sand.

Triplett had turned in full flight and

was sprinting up the gradual incline, with bullets beating the dirt around him as the other white man and the Apaches took long-range shots at his lithe running figure. Snatching the Henry from the dead pony's side as he fled past, Triplett kept his long legs driving hard, and most of the shots were falling short. Mounted Indians hurtled out of the encampment below and hammered up the slope, but their charge lost momentum when the rapid reports of a Winchester rang out above and two of the bucks plunged bouncing and twisting into the dust.

Looking up Triplett grinned as he saw Glenway standing square and solid and calm on the crest, a great oak of a man wreathed in the smoke of his deadly Winchester. If I could shoot like Glen, he thought, it would've been a lot easier and quicker to knock off that Salvesson. Glen would've put him under with the first shot. . . . Now he was alongside of Glenway, and together they legged it for the adobe house and burst in through the door, panting and sweating.

Triplett stretched out on the floor, his chest and shoulders heaving mightily, his whole body soaked with sweat. Somebody brought him a canteen, and he was surprised to see Barbara Scott kneeling there beside him.

"Thank God you're all right!" murmured the girl, placing her cool hand on his fevered brow and wet-curled bronze hair. "That was the bravest thing I ever saw."

"You—saw it?" Triplett asked wonderingly.

The bright chestnut head nodded fiercely. "Yes—and I'm glad. I'm glad!"

"May not do much good," Triplett said. "I thought it might break 'em up, but I don't know. . . . It may work in reverse."

Glenway turned from the window. "They're comin' up," he said quietly. "If we beat 'em off this time they won't be comin' back. Salvesson ain't there to drive 'em."

"Cut me loose!" cried Chip Cahee. "For God's sake cut me loose and let me fight!"

Glenway looked at Triplett, Trip nodded, and Glen bowed in agreement.

"We need you, Cahee," said Glenway. "But don't make any funny moves here, or you'll die damn quick."

"Don't worry," Cahee said. "I'm all right now. I ain't got no hard feelin' against Trevor. Just them Apaches I wanta get at."

Tom Trevor came over and helped Glenway untie the sergeant. Cahee got up and moved around to restore the circulation, stamping his feet and swinging his arms. Trevor held out his hand and Cahee gripped it firmly.

"We'll give 'em hell," Trevor said, with his shy smile.

"You're damn right, kid!" grinned Chip Cahee. "But I'm kinda sorry about Bampton. I musta gone outa my head there."

"Well, in a way you done him a favor," Glenway said. "The Indians woulda killed him anyway, and not quick and clean either."

Triplett clambered to his feet with a weary sigh, shaking his head and smiling as he reloaded the Henry rifle. "Here we go again, boys," he drawled. "Here we go again."

CHAPTER IX

The Apaches Swarm

THIS time the Apaches attacked with warriors both mounted and on foot. The horsemen came first, howling and riding hell-for-leather over the ragged ranks of the dead, and hanging to the ponies' tails were other infuriated redmen screeching for vengeance. Once again bullets and arrows scorched the adobe wall and droned through the windows. Once more Triplett and Cahee, Glenway and Trevor, fired until their rifles were spent, grasped for other rifles and went on triggering and levering, pouring the hot lead into the copper-

skinned horde of blood-lusting madmen. And Barbara and Mona loaded the emptied Henrys with fingers that were becoming deft and skilful, automatic in the process.

Horses and riders went down in the boiling dust and smoke. Indians on foot and on horseback came streaming through the gaps, trodding the dead and dying under moccasins and hoofs, driving toward the adobe wall that flamed with an almost solid and continuous sheet of jetting fire. Dust stormed and billowed high, smoke swirled and reeked densely, and the Apaches came shrieking on over their own dead, a hideous red tide surging in against the Halfway House.

And this time they reached the wall, a thin swarming line of enraged survivors, hacking at the door with hatchets and gun-stocks, lunging at the windows, some of them right into the muzzle-blasts of Henry rifles.

A brown body came flying through the untenanted window on the extreme left as if propelled by a slingshot. Triplett swiveled around and slashed a bullet into the shaven skull. When he swung back to his window another Apache was halfway across the sill with an upflung tomahawk. Triplett's hammer clicked on an empty shell. Ducking the thrown hatchet he brought his rifle-butt up into that grotesque face with tremendous force, and the Indian toppled back out of sight. Triplett caught up another Henry and opened fire point-blank.

A painted form sailed in over Glenway's rifle barrel and smashed into his broad chest. Stumbling back from the breath-taking impact, Glenway beat the Indian to the floor with his clublike left fist and brought his heavy right boot up under the red jawbone in a terrific kick that broke the brave's neck and left his head twisted at an incredible angle. Another big buck was scrambling at the sill when Glenway's rifle exploded in his face.

A brawny warrior landed on the barrel of Trevor's rifle and sprung it

free from the boy's grip. Trevor whipped out his revolver and shot the man dead as he lighted beneath the window. A second fiend sprawled across the window-sill, head and shoulders inside, knife-hand flailing. Trevor dodged the shining steel and stroked his gun-barrel down upon the greasy black head, feeling the bone give under the blow as the Indian let go and fell back outside.

But now the door was splintered and swaying inward from the outside battering, threatening to go down and let the crazed pack in to overrun the place. Sergeant Chip Cahee saw this, and snarling curses he climbed to the window-ledge. An explosion blinded him and his left side went numb as he swung clear of the window and jumped his bootheels into the Apache face below him, stamping it deep into the earth.

Another leap across tangled brown corpses carried Chip Cahee into the midst of the Indians at the doorway, and he shot one of them in the back of the neck and bashed in the face of another with his rifle-stock. The others turned from the door and went after him with hatchets, knives and guns, but Cahee was completely berserk now, swinging his rifle by the barrel, beating them into the ground until the stock shattered on that ironhard head. He had diverted them entirely from the entrance.

CAHEE was wounded in half-a-dozen places by this time, his uniform in gory shreds and tatters, but he got his six-gun out and dropped two more braves before they swarmed over him, chopping him down and cutting him to pieces, tearing at him like ravenous wolves. When the other whites saw that Cahee was done for they lined their rifles on the jostling pack and blasted it apart, piling the copper bodies high about the mutilated figure of Sergeant Chip Cahee, firing until there was no life left in all that mangled heap.

And that did it, the attack was broken, the Apaches were straggling back down

the open slaughterhouse of the slope, and the blood-spattered bullet-scarred adobe wall was silent again in under the rising smoke and dust. The three men inside sank to the floor in utter exhaustion, and the two women bowed their haunted faces into their trembling hands.

"Well, Sarge sure did it," said Glenway. "He sure saved our hair that trip."

Triplett nodded and smiled grimly. "I reckon it's a right good thing we cut that lad loose, Glen."

"He peeled the whole pack of 'em off that door like peelin' birch bark off'n a tree," Glenway said in slow awed tones.

"It was the only way to stop 'em there," Trevor murmured. "Cahee saw the door was goin' and he went overboard like a bolt of thunder."

Triplett reached for a canteen and shook it gently. There was only the slightest sloshing of water in the bottom. "Drink, girls?" Triplett held it out to them, but both women shook their heads in refusal.

Mona Lowry forced a wan smile. "You boys need it worse than we do."

Triplett moistened his tongue and parched lips, passed it on to Tom Trevor. Then Glenway took his tiny swallow and strode to the windows.

"They won't be back again, I figure," Glenway said thoughtfully. "I never saw Indians take the lickin' they have and keep comin' back for more. Samuels—or Salveson—musta promised them everythin' from here to California. He was a slick tongued article, all right."

Glenway gazed into the west and saw a saffron haze such as a column of horsemen might raise on an ordered march. He watched it and waited until he was certain. He said:

"Somebody's comin' from Almada way, and it looks to me like the United States Cavalry. There'll be some tall swearin' when the boys get this burial detail."

The others trailed to the windows, their sunken grimed faces lighting as they saw dust spiral up against the blazing blue sky. Barbara Scott and Tom Trevor stood side by side, their fingers interlaced, their heads bent together.

"I'm going back to Ohio," Mona Lowry said suddenly. "And I'm never going to leave home again."

"What are you goin' to do, Barbara?" asked Trevor shyly.

"I don't know yet, Tom," she said. "I thought I'd go back home, too, but I don't know. . . . Now that I'm out here, well, I think I'll look around."

"Me too, Barbara," Trevor said. "Maybe we can kinda look around together."

"Why yes, Tom," said Barbara Scott, smiling radiantly. "That's what we'll do."

Triplett grinned. "You kids got a grubstake comin', you know. We inherited some money from Bampton." He turned his lean sweat-lacquered face to Glenway. "What do you figure on doin', Glenny?"

"I'll most likely get drunk," Glenway said solemnly. "I generally do after a shindig like this. It relaxes a man somethin' wonderful. And killin' always gives me a powerful thirst."

Triplett laughed softly and smote Glenway's broad back. "I reckon I'll string along with you on that, pardner," he drawled. "I sure could stand a lot of relaxin' right about now."

Far down the road to the west the head of a long blue column of riders jogged into view, and the hearts of the watchers in the adobe house went up warm and singing. The Apaches had broken camp and were fleeing across the plain into the southeast.

"Cahee wanted to make history and he sure did," said Triplett. "I'm goin' to tell the Army about that boy, and I'm goin' to brag him up more'n Cahee could've done himself."

★ ★ DIM TRAIL

By BURT THOMAS

RICK MARLOWE rode up to the Circle V ranch house just as the roundup cook brought a letter from town. It was addressed to Dad Fenton, owner of the Circle V and Rick's boss for the past six years. Dad Fenton read the letter and his face drew into

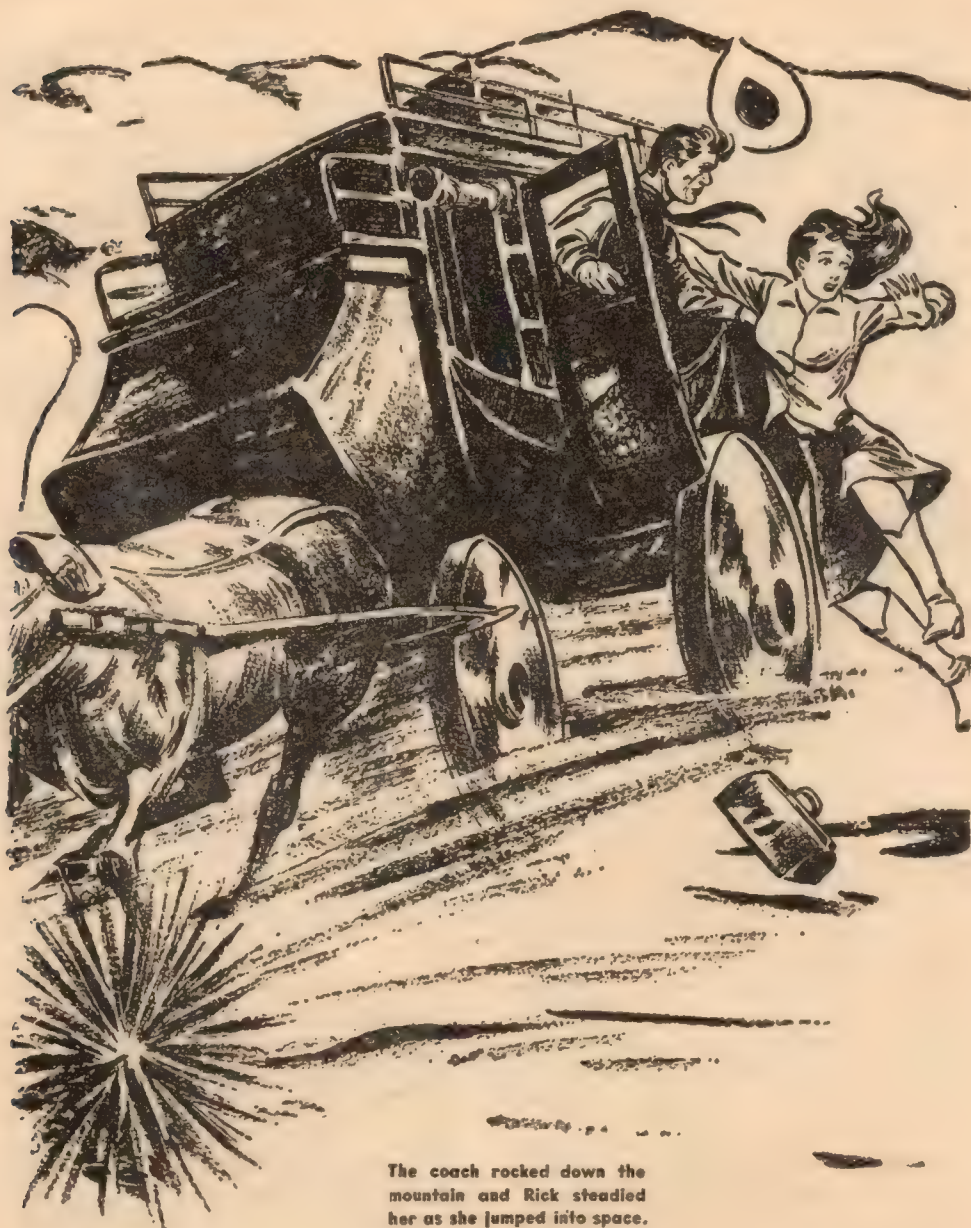
bleak lines as he handed it over to Rick.

It was from Sol Coulter, the money-lender in Windlass. It was a demand



Illustrated by
Frank Volp

SMOKE-OUT ★ ★



The coach rocked down the mountain and Rick steadied her as she jumped into space.

Rick Marlowe rode into town for a showdown with the crooked money lender, but instead, found himself in the midst of a bunch of owlhoots. He had to get out of THAT, to square himself with Dad Fenton's pretty dark-eyed daughter and save the ranch.

for immediate payment of all amounts due Sol Coulter, including interest.

"What ails that son of a coyote?" Rick demanded. "I sat right there in the front room and heard him with my own ears tell you he'd give you all the time you needed on that note. You'd have to sell off half your stock to pay him now—since Hondo Pete and his rustlers been whittlin' down the herd!"

The screen door slammed, and Dad Fenton's dark-eyed daughter, Holly, hurried out to join them. She read the letter and turned pale. "I remember his exact words!" she stated emphatically. "Any rancher planning to bring in blooded herefords and grade up the range stock in this valley deserves a helping hand. Forget the note 'til you get some cash ahead."

But Dad Fenton wasn't to be stampeded. He slowly pulled off his wide-brimmed hat, dried his damp forehead with a bandanna and brushed back his thin, graying hair. "Sol Coulter holds the aces," he said with finality. "He has my signature to a paper—everything down in black and white. All I have is a vague promise—thin as the air it was spoken with."

"Sol made his offer in front of witnesses—Holly and me!" Rick flared quickly. "I'm headin' for town and make that curly son put it on paper."

Top hand at the Circle V, Rick stood five feet, ten, without his high-heeled Justins, and held a fairly steady weight of one hundred, sixty pounds—a trifle light in a rough-and-tumble but compensated by a lithe toughness that had won him respect on the Circle V range. Rock-gray eyes and a thatch of oat-straw hair under his worn Stetson accentuate the solid look of his square jaw, belied the quick fire that could flare within him. "I'm ridin'," he declared. "If Coulter's word is no better than that dude face of his, I can right soon fix that part!"

"You'll do no ridin'," the Circle V owner countered. "Exceptin' to check the south bog hole for down critters. We got no legal right against Sol Coulter.

Got no more chance fightin' him than them two greasy-sack outfits that tried it last year and lost their saddles. Better stick to the ranch and see that Hondo Pete don't rustle the rest of our stuff 'fore we can sell it."

But the fire was gnawing at Rick's innards. The thought of Sol Coulter's trim black mustaches decorating his too-white skin, the way they quirked up when the money-lender eyed Holly, drove all reason from him. "I'm ridin'," he repeated. "Orders or not!"

"Son," Dad Fenton called him. "I sure hate to see you do this." He eyed Rick steadily for a long moment. "I'm still givin' the orders on the Circle V. You ride out of here now and you're through."

RICK cut a look at Holly then, standing stiffly beside her father. Her hat was off, letting the late afternoon sun strike fire from each wave and curl in her dark hair. Her lips were parted almost as though she smiled, and there was pride in her face. But nothing could hide the anguish in her eyes.

There stood the girl he hoped to marry, for whose sake he would have fought a dozen men barehanded. There was the symbol of all he had worked and struggled for. But he couldn't turn back. He spun on his heel and swung astride the little pinto and galloped down the road to Windlass.

The money-lender kept a pretentious house just off the main street, the old Hollingsworth house he had taken when the storekeeper couldn't pay off a mortgage. Rick reached the place just after dark.

Sol Coulter was at home, sitting in front of his big desk figuring, when Rick burst in. At sight of the expensive clothes and the waxed mustaches, Rick's temper boiled and his right hand dropped instinctively to hover over the worn gun butt in the holster at his hip.

Before a word could be spoken, he heard a quick step behind him and felt

a hard gun muzzle tickling his ribs. Coulter's face wrinkled in a sardonic grin, and he looked past Rick.

"Much obliged, Bent," he said smoothly. "You got back from Casita Canyon right on time. Haul the critter out into the shed and keep him busy while I step over and get the new deputy sheriff. He'll be proud to start his career by jailin' a hold-up artist."

Rick cursed the gun in his back. "I came here to talk business!" he roared at the money-lender.

"Yeah?" Coulter grinned. "There's two of us to say it was a gun-backed hold-up." He picked up his hat and sauntered out.

In the shed at the back of the house, Bent Burkin took Rick's gun and belt and tossed them back into the house. He reached to a peg on the wall and took down a loaded, coiled bullwhip. Holstering his own weapon, he took the whip in his gun hand and spilled the snakey coils across the floor against Rick's feet. "This way I keep in practice," he grinned. Wicked lights danced in his deep-set eyes.

Rick waited, studying the room. There was a small window behind Bent Burkin, near the door that led into the house. There was another door, locked and bolted, in the outside wall. He braced himself as the lash sang out and cut across his shoulders.

Bent Burkin laughed hoarsely. "That's a sample—to learn you to stay clear of me and Sol. Now dance!"

He swung the lash and it popped like a firecracker around Rick's legs, drove pain rocketing through his body. Burkin hauled back on the whip again, and its lash struck the pane of glass in the window behind him, smashing it to slivers. He whirled at the sound, and Rick dove for the locked outside door.

He had some doubts if a man could go through a door like that—but he went through. He was still shedding splinters of wood when he reached his horse out front and spurred away to the tune of Bent Burkin's wild shots behind him.

THE town of Windlass came alive fast. Cowhands poured from the Red Front Saloon at the sound of the shooting. Glad of any excuse for excitement, they unlimbered and added their guns to the chorus. Lead buzzed around Rick's ears like bees in swarming time.

He found the road that led to the hills and reined into it, pounding away into the darkness. He reached the first ridge above town, and there was no sign of pursuit. He was in the clear.

But what to do then, he pondered. Sol Coulter had him in a real tight corner with that hold-up charge. To try to shrug that off would be plumb loco. It explained why so many beaten-down small ranchers had been accused of violence against Coulter lately and had been railroaded out of the country. Rick had stuck his neck into the same noose the money-lender had been using all season.

Mad clear through, Rick rode deeper into the hills, away from the lights and noises of the town. Coulter had mentioned Casita Canyon. Hondo Pete and his dim-trail rustler crew holed up in Casita Canyon. And Bent Burkin had just come from there. It might not be wise to go snooping around without his gun, but he had no time to spend hunting another weapon. If there was some connection between Sol Coulter, the money-lender, and Hondo Pete, the boss-rustler, it was time to find out. In the pale starlight he urged the pinto up the trail.

As well as he knew the hills it was past noon of the next day before he came into the little canyon, green with crowded cedar. He followed a plain trail then to where he could see a log building nestled against the canyon wall. He reined up and studied the layout.

Smoke trickled from the stone chimney. Beyond were the corrals, and he tried to count the horses, but his pinto was nervous. The animal turned its head and whinnied.

Rick swiveled in the saddle and stared into the muzzle of a Winchester in the

hands of a lanky-buck-toothed rider. The rider nudged his mount on out of the cedar and motioned with the rifle toward the house.

"Boss wants to see you, I reckon. Ride slow and easy-like."

In the log building Rick met Hondo Pete for the first time. He'd heard plenty about the big outlaw and rustler-boss of the hills, some he could believe and some he couldn't. But here was the man himself, no taller than Rick, too fat around the middle. His broad gun-belt cut a furrow across his beefy paunch. Mud-colored eyes in a flat, greasy face looked at Rick with the cold impersonal light of a man selecting an animal for slaughter.

"Corral him in the back room," Hondo Pete ordered. "When we tackle that county seat job in two-three weeks, we'll use him for a decoy. And you, Jermy," he spoke directly to the buck-toothed rider who held his gun on Rick. "You brought him in. You ride herd on him."

FOR the next nine days Rick paced the floor of his little room. It was the strongest jail he'd ever put shoulder to, stout seasoned log walls and a dirt floor that came near being solid rock. There was a heavy lock on the door and whenever it was unlocked, he stared into the muzzle of a drawn gun. The lanky, buck-toothed Jermy never turned his back.

As the days dragged by, Rick listened to the talk in the next room, picking up information that made his blood boil and drove him to pacing the length of his cell.

There was open talk about Hondo Pete's deals with Sol Coulter. The money-lender handled things on his side of the law—Hondo Pete did the rest. And Coulter's trick of demanding cash payments fitted neatly into the play. He'd take no checks.

"How'd we split a check?" the big outlaw boomed. "If we grab it off before it gets to Sol? Now the cash—that's easy. Half for us—half for him!"

"And the money-hog gets all the vel-

vet," one of the men grumbled. "He gets half our haul and then takes it double from the hard-hit rancher. Time we evened up."

Rick counted eight days passed when he heard talk of Fenton's cattle drive to Downing City. And old Dad Fenton, they said, was hurt, thrown from a horse in the roundup. The crew was going on with the drive alone, and Fenton's daughter, Holly, would meet the buyers in Downing City and get the cash.

"Sol's puttin' the pressure on 'em!" Hondo Pete roared. "More meat for our kettle!"

Rick groaned and paced his cell. If he'd stuck to punching cattle and mending fences and left Dad Fenton to manage his own Circle V spread, he'd still have been top hand at the Circle V. It would have been his job to get the cattle drive through to Downing City. And he could have looked after Fenton's cattle money instead of leaving that risky chore to Holly. It was no job for a girl, even without the threat of Hondo Pete. But now all he could do was beat the log walls of his jail.

On the ninth day Bent Burkin rode into camp. He came in with Jermy to see the prisoner. "So that's the voyote bait?" he laughed. "I'm braidin' me another bull-whip tonight to finish a chore. I started a ways back."

But when morning came the whole camp was up early and all rode out on a little pasear into the hills. All except Jermy. He unlocked the door to bring in a plate of biscuits and stew and held his old Colt single-action as usual. When Rick hit him with everything he had, the gun went off so close that burning powder stung Rick's face. Jermy piled into a heap on the floor with the stew and biscuits.

Rick grabbed the outlaw's gun belt and buckled it on. He made a quick raid on the kitchen for provisions and managed to half-fill a sack. Sound of an approaching rider interrupted him. With the sack under his arm he headed for the door. Bright sun blinded him after the dark-

Rick dove for the locked door, and went through it, shedding splinters.



ness of the back room, but he made out Ben Burkin stepping down from his roan gelding thirty feet away.

THE gunman saw Rick at the same instant. He jumped free of his horse and drew. Rick raised his gun and fired in too great a hurry and missed. Burkin's bullet took Rick in the left arm,

tearing a furrow through the flesh. Rick caught his balance, aimed and squeezed off another shot. The gunman stiffened and pitched into the dirt.

Other riders were coming through the cedars. Burkin's roan gelding had shied into the edge of the brush. Rick dodged along the side of the building and approached the horse as carefully as time

allowed. He caught the reins and flung himself into the saddle. By the time he heard the yells of Hondo Pete and the outlaw crew approaching the house, he was well away in the cedars.

But the next three days were far from easy. Rick tried every trail he knew to reach Downing City in time to help Holly look after the money from the cattle sale. But Hondo Pete's riders blocked every pass, and the bullet-torn arm furnished Rick with its own particular brand of torture. He was out of grub and at the end of his rope when he discovered a ragged break in the mountains that would let him down into the valley less than a mile from Downing City—and no gunman waiting to block the trail.

He came down the shale slide, sometimes leading the horse, sometimes the horse dragging him. At Woolly Creek he topped to wash the fresh blood from his shirt where the bullet cut had broken open under the strain. A thin-faced deputy sheriff stepped from behind a tree at his back.

"I gotcha, hold-up man!" the deputy announced over his leveled gun. "You and me's takin' a little trip back to Windlass—if we can catch that west-bound stage out of Downing City."

Holly Fenton was already on the stage when the deputy hailed the driver in front of the livery stable. Rick hunched in beside the deputy on the worn seat of the old Concord coach and crowded his shackled wrist hard against the seat leather.

But the girl never looked in his direction. She sat tiffy erect, staring out through a slit in the drawn curtains to hide the pain in her dark eyes.

"We're running square into trouble," Rick told the deputy quickly. "Hondo Pete and his men aim to stop this stage before it gets to Windlass—most likely in Ringhorn Pass."

The lawman laughed. "What you want we should do—get out and walk?"

Color mounted to Rick's beard-stubbed cheeks. "Put aguard up there with the driver," he grated. "Somebody to swap

lead with that dim-trail gun-crew when they strike."

"Afraid your pals might come after you, huh? Sit tight, hombre. They won't lose no sleep over missin' you."

Rick clenched his fists involuntarily and felt the steel tight on his wrist. He fought down his rising anger and hunched back against the leather. Through the narrow break in the curtain he watched the hillside slip past. The trail ran upgrade, climbing out of the valley, but the fresh horses kept up a steady trot that ate up the miles.

EVERY mile brought them closer to the final showdown. All he had learned back there in Hondo Pete's back room jail cell wouldn't be worth two shakes of a lass rope if he couldn't get the lawman to listen. They'd all be shot like sitting sage-grouse without a chance.

But the deputy had only one idea. He stuck to his single chore. "Like I should have stuck to my job at the Circle V," Rick groaned to himself. When he had put in his two-bits worth he'd horned into a deal that had half the ranchers in the valley ready to sell their saddles. He'd gone into it fighting mad, he knew, but with both eyes open. And he had no regrets for himself—if only Holly hadn't been dragged in.

Rick watched the miles slip past. He cursed his own helplessness and the bland double-dealing of Sol Coulter that drove him to unreasoning anger. He'd lost his temper on a few occasions before, but always the sign had been right, the results had paid off. This time—

The slowing creak of the old coach and the snap of the driver's lash told him they were pulling up the last steep grade into Ringhorn Pass. There was good cover in the pass, on both sides of the road, the last good cover before they struck the downhill run into the little town of Windlass.

Rick twisted around to face the deputy. The movement sent new pain through his bullet-torn left arm.

"Forget about me," he told the law-

man. "I don't count—but get the girl out of here. Hondo Pete don't leave no witnesses!"

The deputy's thin face puckered. "Still on the same tune," he sneered. "I don't savvy your game, hombre—but I'm takin' you into Windlass to collect a chunk of dinero from Sol Coulter, and then on to the county seat. Ain't no yarn you can spin that'll change the deal."

Holly Fenton still stared past the curtain. One of her slim hands gripped a small satchel, something like one the local doctor carried on his horseback trips. The nails of her other hand were cutting into the leather at the edge of the seat.

"Maybe," she suggested bitterly. "Maybe he's right. He's been running with Pete's gun crew long enough to know."

Rick winced at the girl's tone. The sight of her delicate profile, the curls of dark hair bursting from under the man-style ranch hat, the bitterness in her face, sent pain through him.

"Some of Hondo Pete's men could have found out about the cattle deal," Holly went on, speaking to the deputy, ignoring Rick. "If they knew this stage carried all the money from the cattle sale at Downing City—"

They knew it for sure, Rick wanted to blurt out. They knew the whole play, both ends for Sunday! And they knew every move at the Circle V, because Hondo Pete was working hand-in-glove with Sol Coulter. But Rick couldn't spill that news yet—not if this badge-toter was working for Coulter too. This lawman was a stranger to Rick, a newcomer. The less he knew the better.

"The driver'll take care of any dinero he carries," the deputy reassured the girl. "And me—I ain't exactly asleep." Not asleep, Rick thought bitterly, just dead between the ears.

THE coach reached the top of the grade and leveled off through the pines. Rick could hear his own breathing. The deputy was staring out

through the curtains. The driver's whip cracked over the back of the lead team, and all three passengers in the coach jumped at the sound.

Rick turned on the deputy. No use trying to argue. His right wrist was shackled to the deputy's left. His own left arm throbbed mightily. But he balled his left fist and swung, crashing hard against the man's mouth.

There was not enough strength in his arm. The lawman jerked his head back, licking cut lips, and dove for his gun. He swung the weapon up to club it down on Rick's skull.

Then outside, the first rifle cracked. The slug tumbled the driver from his box into the rocky road. The horses broke into a run. The lawman was caught with upraised gun. He jerked around and swung the heavy Colt to the slit in the curtains.

Rick caught a glimpse of one of Hondo Pete's men astride a long-legged bay. The outlaw saw the deputy in the coach and swung his gun up, fired just as the lawman's bullet caught him in the chest. His slug took the deputy between the eyes.

Rick's hand closed over the big Colt before it could fall from the deputy's lax fingers. He gripped it in his shackled right-hand and thumbed back the hammer.

Hondo Pete's broad paunch was plain as he galloped alongside. Rick raised the gun. Abruptly the realization came to him—the outlaws had failed to notice him or the girl. If he shot now, with the long odds against him, he'd draw return fire from the whole crew. Holly would surely be hit. Cautiously he lowered the weapon again and glanced at Holly. She was looking at him for the first time since he'd climbed on the stage at Downing City. And the scorn in her eyes burned deep.

"Why don't you use that gun?" she demanded hotly. "Afraid you'll hurt your pards outside? I wouldn't believe Sol Coulter when he said you had joined the wild bunch. I still held some faith

in you—even when the deputy brought you in. But—now!”

Rick stared down at the weapon in his hand, his jaws clamped shut. The stage still bounded over the rocky road behind running horses, but he could hear a man atop the coach now, throwing down mail sacks, juggling the baggage. If he could face them alone for two minutes, free of the dead weight shackled to his right wrist—

“There goes my package!” Holly gasped. “I gave it to the driver—”

Hondo Pete’s voice boomed along the mountainside. “Grab the lead-team, Tug! Hey, Tug! Slim! Stop them horses! I want a look-see inside the coach!” He rode closer and reached out to wrench open the door.

Rick raised the gun. The odds were against him, but he had no choice. He’d take Hondo Pete and as many more as he could get before his time ran out. And hope they’d spare Holly. He could not bear to think of her getting hurt.

THE coach rocked wildly as the horses wheeled around a sharp corner. It lurched back and sideswiped the rocks. Hondo Pete was caught against the mountain wall. He reined up short and cursed his bungling crew. The man on top the coach jumped to save himself as the vehicle crowded down on the pole team and spooked them into a gallop.

They were on the down grade now, with the stage gaining speed. The outlaws reined up and let it go. They had what they wanted. They yelled and fired in the air to stampede the horses down the twisting, rocky road.

To Rick, the idea was plain. The stage could never stay on the road in the sharp turns. The whole outfit would tumble down the steep canyon into roaring Porcupine Creek and evidence against Hondo Pete would be wiped out.

He ripped the curtain aside with his gun barrel. The raiders were gone, and the mountainside flew past at a dizzy speed. Holly’s voice came to him, taunting, above the creak and rattle of the

coach. “So your pards left you behind—”

Rick caught the door, twisted it open. “Jump!” he ordered tersely. He braced himself and grabbed the girl’s arm as she swayed toward him. The bounce of the coach threw them together and Holly clung to him for a moment. He was painfully aware of her nearness, the perfume of her hair against his face. Then they rocked back toward the mountain, and Rick steadied her as she jumped into space.

The next moment he felt the old coach slew around broadside and he was watching the pole team gallop down the road, chains flying, broken free from the stage. The coach turned over and upended before it plunged down to the dark torrent of Porcupine Creek.

When things swam back into focus before Rick’s eyes, he found himself lying in the middle of the road, still shackled to the lawman. His left arm was numb from the shoulder down, and his head spun wildly when he tried to sit up. Blood from a gash on his forehead ran into his eyes, and he had to force his right hand up, dragging the weight of the deputy’s arm with it, to wipe it from his face. One leg of his levis was torn to ribbons, and his boots looked as if he’d used them for a roughlock on the runaway coach.

He twisted around and saw Holly coming slowly down the mountain toward him. She was limping, favoring an ankle, but she still gripped the little satchel. Rick got his shackled hand into the deputy’s pocket and fumbled out the key, tried to transfer it into his numb left hand.

“Let me help you, Rick,” Holly offered, kneeling beside him. She took the key and tried it in the lock. Metal sprang free, and Rick rubbed his bruised wrist against the roughness of his shirt to kill the pain.

“Thanks, Holly,” he managed. “I’m blamed sorry they got away with your package of cash.”

Holly gave him an odd, searching

look. "Rick—did you join up with Hondo Pete back in the hills?"

Rick wiped the blood from his eyes with his good hand. "You've known me for a long time, Holly. You think I'd run with any wild bunch?"

The girl didn't answer. She busied herself tearing a bandanna into strips. She leaned closer and went to work on the cut in his forehead. "Hold still," she warned, "while I bind this up before you lose the rest of your blood."

AS SHE finished tying the last knot, Rick heard the steady clop-clop of hoofs on the road above. He stumbled to his feet and retrieved the six-gun that had fallen from his fingers when the coach turned over. He picked up his Stetson and jammed it on over the bandage and crowded back against the mountainside, motioning the girl behind him.

Around the bend, bright in the late afternoon sun, trotted the long-legged bay that had carried the outlaw downed by the deputy's bullet. The saddle was empty. Holly hurried out ahead of Rick to catch the horse.

"Like an answer to a prayer!" she cried. "Rick, I have to get home with this money before anything else happens." She indicated the small satchel in her hand.

So that was the deal, Rick suddenly realized. Holly carried the money with her all the time, and Hondo Pete's crew never suspected. "But that package—?" he queried.

Holly gave him a ghost of a smile. "Calico for a new dress. I let everybody believe the package was valuable. And the trick worked." She swung onto the bay, held him in with a firm hand when he tried to bolt. "I couldn't know the driver would lose his life over it."

Rick's thoughts raced. By this time Hondo Pete would have found out his mistake. He'd be doubling back to search the wrecked stage. "Quick, Holly," he called. "Let me take the money and hide out with it 'til Pete's men give up look-

ing. If they catch up with you, it'll be too late!"

Holly's eyes clouded with sudden distrust. "You've got a lot of explaining to do, Rick, before you can handle any chores for the Circle V again." She gave the bay his head and started down the road. At the first bend she reined up and turned to call back but changed her mind and rode on, urging the horse to a gallop.

Rick stared after her for a long moment. The shadows were already deepening in the canyon. She might make it home with that satchel. They wouldn't know she had the outlaw's horse. But what then? He stooped and removed the belt and holster from the still figure of the deputy and buckled it around his own lean hips. The shortest way lay across the hills, he figured, squinting at the sinking sun. If he could get through the canyon and over the first ridge before dark, he'd be on the fringe of Circle V range and could find his way from there. If he judged right there'd be trouble brewing at the Circle V right pronto.

Climbing the rough hillsides took longer than Rick figured. His legs were stiff from the spill, and his high boot heels caught every upthrust of rock. It was only the good fortune of finding a well-used game trail that got him on familiar ground before the last rays of light faded from the sky. He plodded on through the dark, every rock and root tripping his dragging feet, jolting his head into dizzy nausea and sending waves of pain through the arm torn by Bent Burkin's .45 slug.

The moon finally cleared the ridge tops and began inching its way up to glory, flooding the range with pale light. It showed the valley with the ranch buildings ahead, the big log and stone ranch house and scattering of corrals and outbuildings of the Circle V. Not a light showed in any of the buildings.

RICK was less than a half-mile from his destination when he heard the

first burst of shooting. Muzzle flame stabbed the night from a dozen points. He hurried his steps, making for the timbered ridge back of the house. By the time he reached it, the battle had settled down to a slow shoot-and-answer proposition and he could begin to locate the participants.

The barn and corral apparently sheltered the outlaw crew while some of the Circle V hands were forted up in the bunkhouse. Rifle shots sang from the ranch house and an occasional answer came from the gulley beyond the house. So far they seemed about evenly matched and neither side gaining ground.

Rick broke from the timber and ran for the shelter of the high stone well-curb in the middle of the back yard. He made it without a challenge and threw himself into the shadow. The house stood big and dark just ahead with kitchen windows facing him. He edged around the curb and got his feet under him for the next dash when he spotted the shadow of a man moving along the wall. The man stepped out into the moonlight at the corner of the house. It was Jermy!

Rick froze against the stone curb. Seeing the lanky, buck-toothed outlaw here told him the whole story. Hondo Pete and his men were still trying for the cattle money. And he still had time to take a hand in the game.

Jermy carried a short bar. Rick recognized it as the homemade staple-puller he kept in the harness shed. The outlaw hurriedly pried up a kitchen window and stuck the bar under it for a prop. He swung his leg over the sill.

From the corral came a new burst of shooting.

"They're giving him cover," Rick figured. He eared back the hammer on his big Colt and jumped up to make a run for the window. In the shadow his foot caught an empty water bucket on the ground and it tripped him up, sent him sprawling full length in the moonlight, his Stetson rolling out ahead of him.

Jermy flung himself around, his shiny

new gun barrel catching the light as he tried to center on the target. But Rick still gripped the Colt. He fired as he struck the ground, and the lanky outlaw pitched from the window as though sprung from a trap.

Rick got his feet under him and made it to the window in three jumps. He threw a leg over the sill and slid into the dark kitchen. The sound of voices came from the front of the house, raised in argument. He made out Holly and Dad Fenton—and Sol Coulter!

Sol's words were plain. "Sure you got the cash. But I ain't takin' it with me tonight. You think I'm loco? You're responsible for it 'til you bring it in to my office in the morning and get your cancelled note."

Dad Fenton shouted back. "Blast yuh, Coulter! You'd have had your money and been gone 'fore this ruckus ever started if you hadn't tom-fooled around. Looks like you waited a-purpose!"

RICK stepped through the door into the big living room. Moonlight through the wide east windows lighted the whole room. Holly stood by the window holding a Winchester, and Dad Fenton faced Coulter across the room. Rick poked the muzzle of his leveled Colt at the money-lender's smooth shirt-front. "You'll take your dinero now," he ordered. "And hand over the note!"

Sol Coulter turned white. His right hand moved instinctively toward his holstered gun, then froze in mid-air. Holly Fenton gave a surprised cry. Rick couldn't tell if it held relief or fear.

Sol found his voice. "You'll never live this down—"

"Dad Fenton," Rick called. "You better draw this rattler's fangs before he gets a crazy streak."

With the aid of an apple-wood cane, the Circle V owner hobbled across the room. He holstered the big Frontier pistol he carried and reached behind Coulter, lifted the money-lender's gun.

"Now that note!" Rick ordered.

Sol Coulter's hand slid into his coat

pocket. His eyes still fastened on Rick's unwavering gun muzzle. He brought out a folded paper and reached it carefully to Fenton.

Dad Fenton tucked Coulter's gun in his belt and took the paper. He hobbled to the table and leaned against it, laying his cane on the edge of the table to free his hands. "This is it," he said, examining the paper. "Holly, bring out the money again." He slipped the paper into his shirt pocket and picked up the cane.

"Money won't do you much good, Coulter," Rick burst out. "When the law hears about your tie-up with Hondo Pete—"

Holly screamed. Dad Fenton swung up his apple-wood cane, threw it with whistling force at the door to the kitchen.

The open kitchen window! Rick had forgotten it in the urge to catch Coulter. He spun around just as muzzle flame lanced at him from the doorway and a heavy slug burned across his ribs like a red-hot running iron.

Hondo Pete's bulging figure filled the doorway. He had one arm up in front of his face in an awkward gesture to ward off the flying cane. He squinted over it and brought up his smoking six-gun for another shot.

Rick triggered twice, as fast as he could work the action of his Colt, and saw both bullets strike home, saw the heavy boss-outlaw jerk under their deadly impact. Hondo Pete's gun exploded again and the slug clipped a furrow of hair from Rick's scalp. Then the big outlaw leaned heavily against the door frame and slid down to the floor. His feet came to rest on the applewood cane that had spoiled his first shot.

Abruptly, Rick was aware of a clatter behind him and he turned in time to see Sol Coulter fading through the unbarred outside door. He slammed a shot

after him, but his bullet only tore a sliver from the door frame.

"Let him go," Fenton yelled. "I got my note back."

Rick jumped out into the doorway. Coulter was running, hugging the shadow of the buildings, trying to reach his horse. Rick fired, and the money-lender stumbled, caught his balance again, and hesitated. To reach his mount he'd cross open moonlit ground in front of Rick. Abruptly he swung around and ran straight for the corral. Rick raised his gun for a long shot, but a sudden burst of fire from the corral beat him to it. Sol Coulter's yell rang loud in the night—and ended in a dying man's scream.

"Hondo's crew got him," Rick answered Dad Fenton's unspoken question. "Must have figured it was one of us tryin' to rush 'em."

The shooting stopped and ghostly silence prevailed. Rick raised his voice. "Hey, you renegades in the corral! Your hand's plumb played out. Hondo Pete's dead in here—and you just downed Sol Coulter."

There was no answer. After a moment came the creak of saddle leather and rattle of shod hoofs on the gravel patch beyond the corral. Then a handful of riders turned into the road far beyond gun range and galloped off in the moonlight.

"The end of that chore," Rick breathed, turning to face his old boss. "And I reckon I'm still fired off the Circle V."

Dad Fenton grinned, and his mustache bristled up. "Yeah, son! Fired for good. But from the way Holly's been a-carryin' on while you was away, you don't want to go workin' for no wages. You're going to be part owner of the Circle V."

Rick couldn't answer then, for Holly was in his arms.

LARIAT LUCY

BULLETS FOR BRANDS.

WHEN SHERIFF LANGS DAUGHTER LUCY APPROACHES THE CORRAL ONE MORNING THE SHERIFF'S RANCH FOREMAN BRINGS UP LUCY'S HORSE.

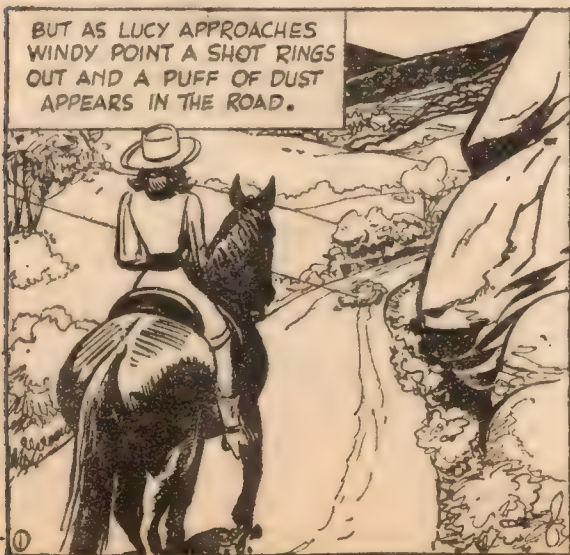


BAD NEWS, LUCY--WE'VE BEEN OUT ALL MORNING LOOKING FOR "BALDY," YOUR LITTLE, BALD-FACE CALF -- CAN'T FIND HIM ANYWHERE!

WE'VE GOT TO FIND HIM -- I'M RIDING OVER TO VINCE CARSON'S RANCH NOW TO SEE JANE --- WHEN I COME BACK WE'LL LOOK UP ON THE RIDGE -- -- BALDY MAY HAVE WANDERED UP THERE!

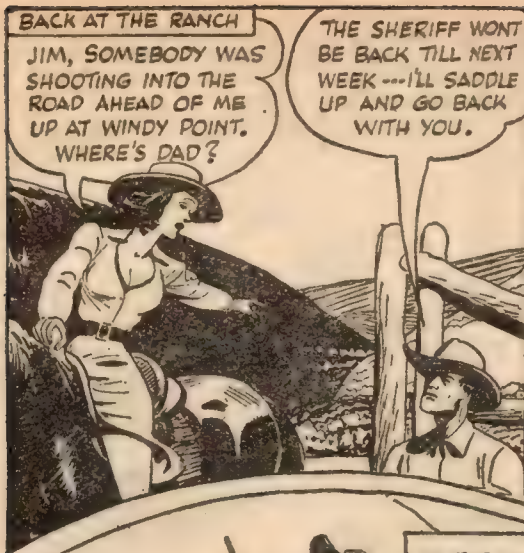


BUT AS LUCY APPROACHES WINDY POINT A SHOT RINGS OUT AND A PUFF OF DUST APPEARS IN THE ROAD.



WHEN ANOTHER SHOT FROM HER UNSEEN ENEMY PLOWS UP THE ROAD AHEAD LUCY TURNS HER HORSE AND RACES FOR HOME.





BACK AT THE RANCH

JIM, SOMEBODY WAS SHOOTING INTO THE ROAD AHEAD OF ME UP AT WINDY POINT. WHERE'S DAD?

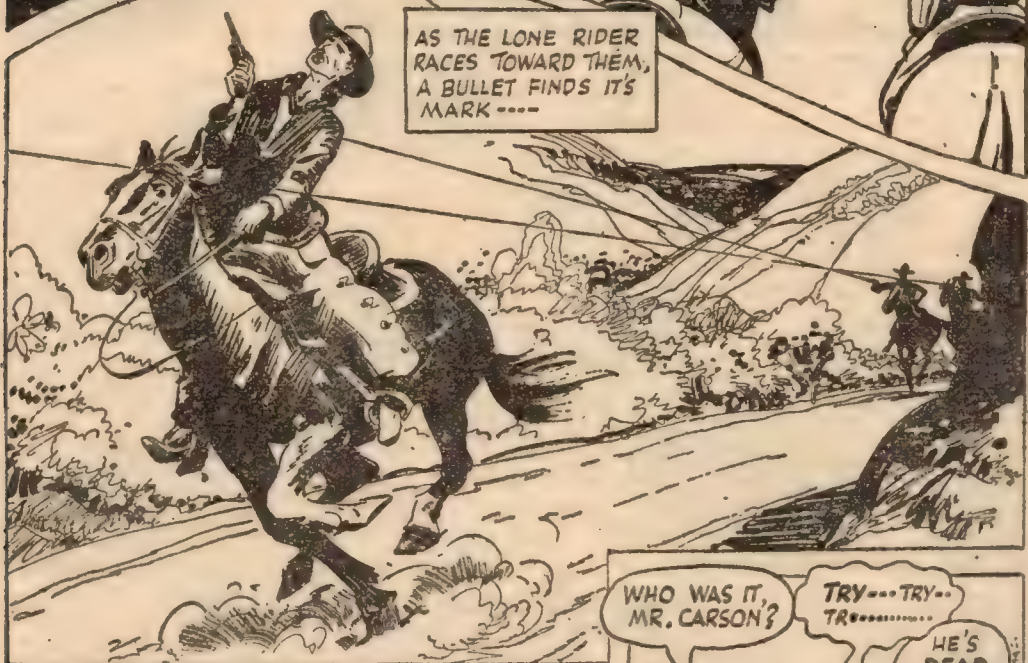
THE SHERIFF WON'T BE BACK TILL NEXT WEEK --- I'LL SADDLE UP AND GO BACK WITH YOU.



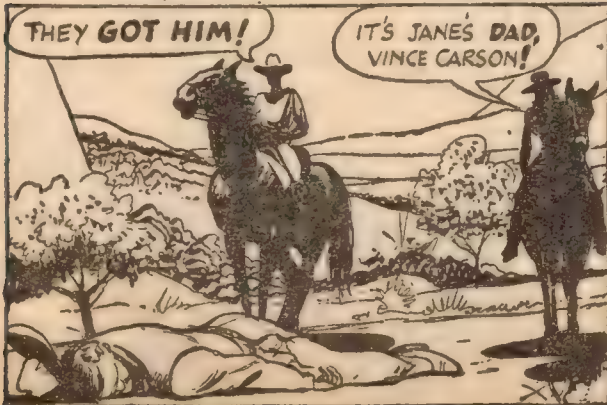
AS THEY NEAR WINDY POINT---

MIGHT BE SOMEBODY SHOT A DEER OUT OF SEASON AND DON'T WANT ANY WITNESSES --- HEY! I HEAR SHOTS!

YES! AND HERE COMES SOMEBODY AROUND THE POINT! --- HE'S BEING CHASED!



AS THE LONE RIDER RACES TOWARD THEM, A BULLET FINDS ITS MARK ----



THEY GOT HIM!

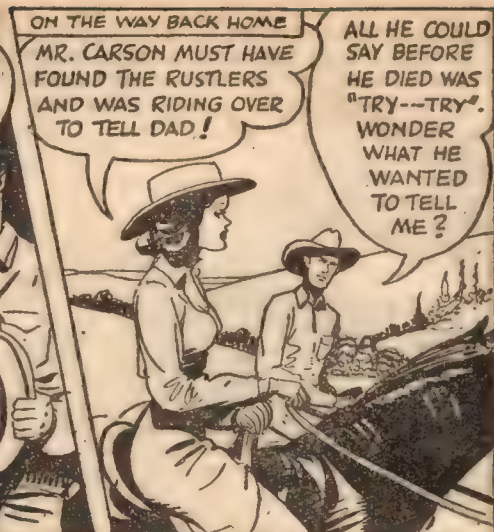
IT'S JANE'S DAD, VINCE CARSON!



WHO WAS IT, MR. CARSON?

TRY---TRY-- TRY-----

HE'S DEAD, JIM!



AS THE TERRIFIED
CALF BOUNDS PAST.

WHOA THERE, BALDY!
I WISH BALDY COULD
TALK --- HE MIGHT
TELL US A LOT.



BACK AT THE RANCH
HEY LOOK! BALDY'S
BEEN **BRANDED!**
MAYBE HE'S GOING
TO TELL US SOMETHING
AFTER ALL.

**TRIANGLE-
Q!** THAT'S A
NEW OUTFIT
ON THE OTHER
SIDE OF THE
RIDGE.



HM! ---TRIANGLE Q!
"TRI---TRI---", WONDER
IF THAT WAS WHAT MR. CARSON
WAS TRYING TO SAY!



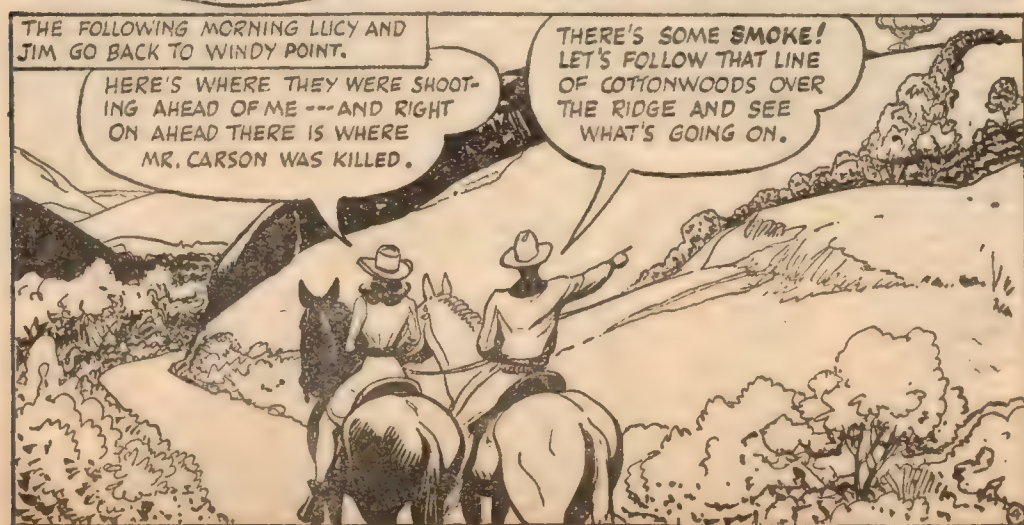
LOOK HERE, JIM,
IT'S AWFULLY EASY
TO CHANGE VINCE
CARSON'S BRAND
INTO TRIANGLE Q



THE FOLLOWING MORNING LUCY AND
JIM GO BACK TO WINDY POINT.

HERE'S WHERE THEY WERE SHOOT-
ING AHEAD OF ME ---AND RIGHT
ON AHEAD THERE IS WHERE
MR. CARSON WAS KILLED.

THERE'S SOME SMOKE!
LET'S FOLLOW THAT LINE
OF COTTONWOODS OVER
THE RIDGE AND SEE
WHAT'S GOING ON.



AT THE CREST OF THE RIDGE LUCY AND JIM DISMOUNT AND CREEP THROUGH THE COTTONWOODS.



SURE ENOUGH, THEY'RE BRANDING ALL RIGHT— THERE MUST BE 20 HEAD IN THAT LITTLE CORRAL!

YOU STAY HERE. --I'M GOING UP CLOSER AND SEE WHO THEY ARE.



JIM CRAWLS TO THE FRONT OF THE COTTONWOOD CLUMP, NOT REALIZING THAT BLACKIE, HIS FAITHFUL HORSE, IS FOLLOWING. JUST AS JIM RAISES FOR A BETTER VIEW--



---BLACKIE STEPS ON A DEAD BRANCH,

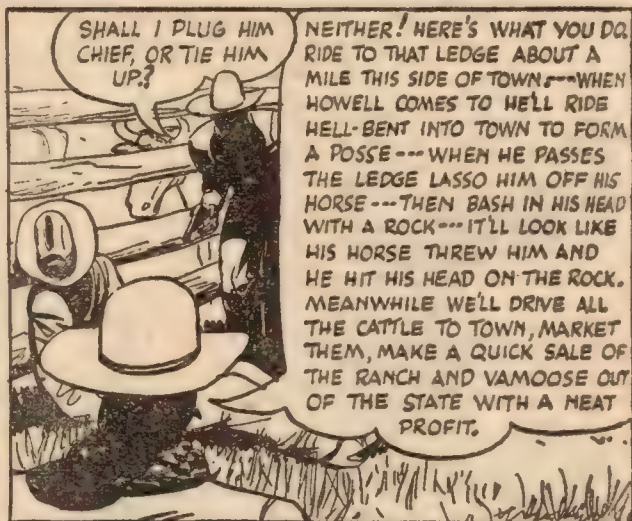
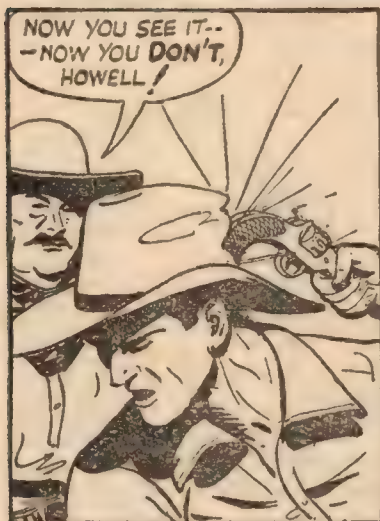
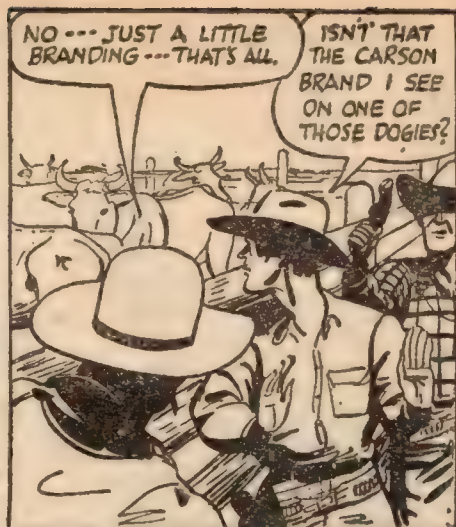
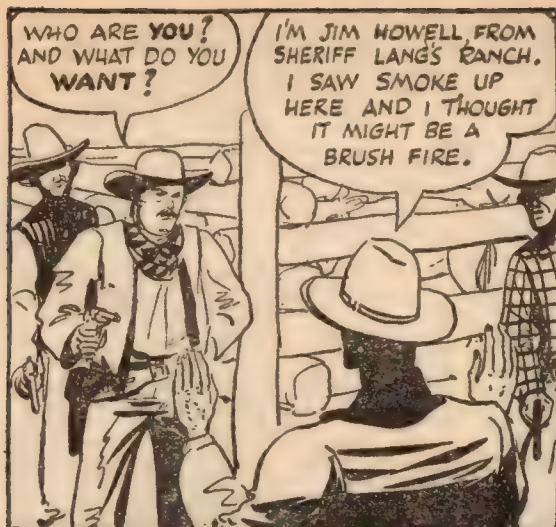
CRACK!



INSTANTLY FOUR GUNS HAVE JIM COVERED.

COME OUT OF THERE WITH YOUR HANDS UP, STRANGER!





IN A FEW MINUTES THE
RUSTLER RIDES UP---AND
GETS A SURPRISE.

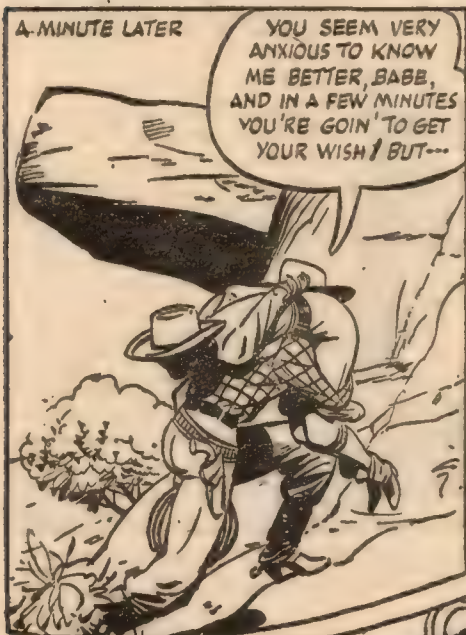


BUT, WHEN LUCY APPROACHES THE
APPARENTLY UNCONSCIOUS RUSTLER TO
TIE HIM UP, HE SUDDENLY COMES TO LIFE.



A-MINUTE LATER

YOU SEEM VERY
ANXIOUS TO KNOW
ME BETTER, BABE,
AND IN A FEW MINUTES
YOU'RE GOIN' TO GET
YOUR WISH! BUT---



---FIRST I'VE
GOT SOME ROPIN' TO
DO MYSELF---AND
HERE HE COMES
NOW!



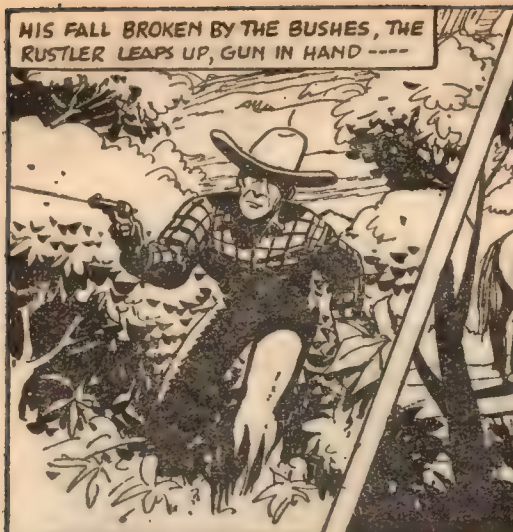
AS THE RUSTLER
SWINGS HIS ROPE---



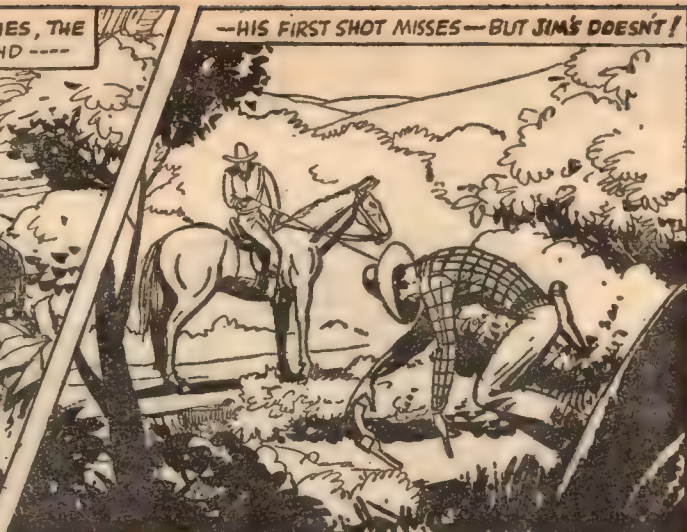
WHAT
TH---?



HIS FALL BROKEN BY THE BUSHES, THE
RUSTLER LEAPS UP, GUN IN HAND ----



—HIS FIRST SHOT MISSES— BUT JIM'S DOESN'T!



AS JIM, MYSTIFIED BY THE ATTACK,
TURNS HIS EYES TO THE LEDGE, HE
SEES A STRANGE SIGHT.



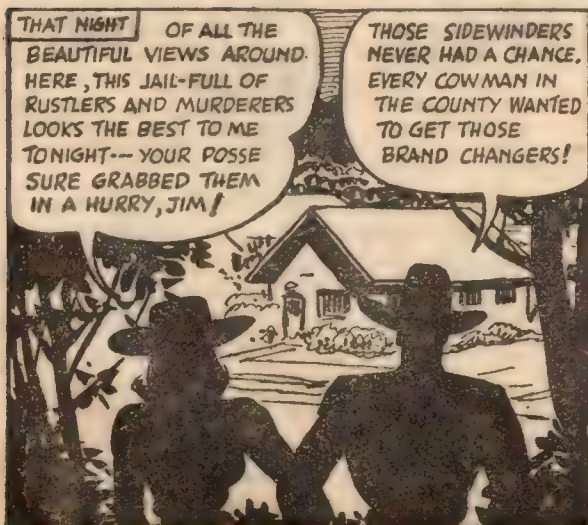
THERE'S
ONLY ONE
PAIR OF GAMS
LIKE THAT IN
THIS COUNTY.

HI!
LUCY!

THANK GOD,
YOU'RE SAFE!



THAT NIGHT OF ALL THE
BEAUTIFUL VIEWS AROUND
HERE, THIS JAIL-FULL OF
RUSTLERS AND MURDERERS
LOOKS THE BEST TO ME
TONIGHT— YOUR POSSE
SURE GRABBED THEM
IN A HURRY, JIM!



THOSE SIDEWINDERS
NEVER HAD A CHANCE.
EVERY COWMAN IN
THE COUNTY WANTED
TO GET THOSE
BRAND CHANGERS!

AND THAT
REMINDS ME
—I'D LIKE
TO CHANGE
YOUR BRAND
TO MINE!

COULD HAPPEN,
MAYBE —I SURE
GO FOR YOUR
BRAND OF
KISSES!



BLAST AT THE

By
PAUL HANNA



Illustrated by
H. W. Kiemle

BILL SEEL reined up and stared at the wreckage of a dipping vat. Gateposts and chute timbers were splintered and the concrete vat had been caved in. Seel studied the ragged chunks of concrete while he rolled a cigarette.

"Dynamite did that," he growled. "Somebody on this range don't take to the idea cattle should be dipped. That's strange, an' makes me curious. . . . An' I don't like devils that take to dynamite!"

Seel slapped one hand against his leather leggings as he rode on toward the timbered bank of Moon-spray River. He shrugged broad shoulders impatiently, rested the fingers of his right hand on the worn butt of a .45 in a plain quick-draw holster, and turned east at the river's curving timber line.

"In Oklahoma," Seel reflected, "Moon-spray River would be called a crick. An' the outfit that wrecked dippin' vats would

CATTLE DIP

There was somebody on the range who didn't think that cattle should be dipped, and was willing to use dynamite to prove his point!

"Let 'er go!" Seel yelled as the man backed up, holding the girl in front of him.



be called on to decorate a limb! I reckon I'll have to educate my neighbors before I move my outfit in up here."

He slowed his pace as he rounded a bend, his attention attracted by a slender youth near the riverbank. Clad in a faded flannel shirt, worn waist, overalls, and scuffed boots, the young hand had his back to Bill Seel.

Seel watched him draw creosote dip from a barrel and pour it into the sloping concrete dipping vat near the river. New posts and timbers indicated this vat had just been built.

The cowboy tossed the bucket aside and laid hands to the handle of a "One-arm John" and commenced heaving back and forth. The little one-cylinder pump

made a monotonous clicking-squeezing sound as it sucked water from the narrow stream and ran it into the dipping vat.

Bill Seel, then, turned his attention to the horseman who rode out of the light timber across the Moonspray, and something prompted him to pull his horse behind a screen of willows. He watched the rider cross the stream and dismount close to the vat.

The noise of the Moonspray and the clicking of the pump covered the sound of the man's approach. He came up behind the slender cowhand, touched his shoulder, and stepped back.

Seel watched the youth as he whirled, and then recoiled. The tall man moved, grabbed the wooden pump handle and yanked it loose; he raised one foot and pushed the little pump toward the river. The boy hesitated, rushed the other, and was met with open arms.

A high-pitched scream sounded and the lad's old hat fell off. Bill Seel hit his horse with the hooks and snarled, "The little one's a girl!"

IT WAS a girl, whole yellow hair came down to her shoulders as she struggled in the arms of the tall, gaunt man.

Seel seemed to squirt out of the saddle. He had a good look at the tall man, who put the girl on her feet, crooked his left arm around her neck and held her back to him.

Seel had seen a lot of hideous faces in his time; but never a map to match this fellow's. His dark eyes were set deeply in bony sockets under a narrow, overhanging brow. His nose was thin, his mouth a gashed line that seemed a knife-slit in his yellow skin. He looked like something that had kicked out of a coffin: a yellowing, living corpse.

"Let 'er go, blast you!" Seel yelled as the graveyard citizen backed up, holding the girl in front of him.

"Keep back!" The man's voice was a hollow, funereal sound. "Don'tcha!" as Seel moved around and reached for him. The man's free right hand dropped and

started to rise, lifting a gun from the leather as it came up.

The girl squirmed, set her bootheels into the ground and pushed backward. The man stumbled. His gun roared and bits of earth and dry grass flew up close to Bill Seel's feet. Bill grabbed at the girl and missed her as the other man lost balance and started falling backward. He kept his arm around the girl's neck and pulled her with him.

"Look out!"

Seel's warning was wasted. The big man swore and the girl screamed as they went backward into the open dipping vat. Water and creosote splashed up, closed over the two. Seel felt sick at his stomach as he grabbed up the heavy, long forked tree limb—the ducking pole used to shove an animal's head under as it swam through the vat—someone had cut and put it in readiness.

The big man's head broke the surface first; the girl came up, choking, strangling, blinded and tortured and smothering in the creosote bath. The man grabbed at the pole. Seel jerked it out of his reach.

"Grab!" he yelled, thrusting the stick into the girl's frantically clutching hands. She held on. Seel pulled her to the incline and her feet touched bottom. She hung on, trying to walk as he pulled her on out.

The man in the vat was fighting, trying to get his breath. He found bottom, then came crawling up the vat's exit slope on hands and knees.

He flattened out, gagging, writhing as the creosote began to burn his skin. "My eyes!" he choked. "Gimme somethin' to wipe my eyes on. H'p me, fella. Do somethin'."

"Crawl in the river, if you can find it!" Seel snarled. He steadied the girl, held her at arm's length and helped her to the water. "Lay down in it," he commanded. He stood in the water, bent, tugged at her boots.

THE girl ducked her head, spurted a mouthful of water, ducked under

again. "Hang on to a rock an' soak a second," Seel ordered. The girl kept her eyes closed tightly and nodded to indicate she understood.

Seel turned to the man who'd crawled into the water below them. "Here's a piece of my shirt tail," Seel snarled. "Wipe your eyes, get on your horse an' get out of here!"

The man grabbed the piece of cloth. "I ain't ridin' until I get this burnin' chokin', stingin' stuff off me!" He groaned and rolled in the water as he wiped his eyes.

"You'll ride!" Seel snapped. He started the man to his feet by booting him in the ribs. "Tail it!" Seel spat. "I ought to fist whip you on a couple counts. I got a better idea than that. I'll save you up for a killin' later on."

"I'll burn up by the time I get back to the ranch," the man protested, blinking his reddening eyes.

Seel yanked his gun. "Get on your horse or dive back in the vat! You hear me preach."

The man staggered to his horse. The animal snorted as he hauled himself into the saddle. He bounced up when he put his weight on the hull and was standing in the stirrups as he rode away, crying in a horse, pain-filled voice: "I'll see you in hell for the hell I'm in right now!"

The girl was sitting in water to her neck when Seel turned back to her. She was biting her lips, moving in protest of the pains burning her.

"Get out of them dip-soaked duds," Seel commanded.

"Why, I will not! You think—"

"I ain't needin' to think. I'm tellin' you. Pull your clothes off an' soak in your birthday suit. I'm goin' to get some stuff to fix you up. If you don't take off them rags, I'll take them off for you!"

He presented his back to her as he moved toward his horse. The girl glared at him and started to get out of the water. She whimpered, sat down until the stream ran around her neck again, and commenced to shuck her clothes.

Seel tried to appear cool and impassive

as he returned. He stood knee-deep in the Moonspray, a blanket over one arm, a flat can of salve in his hands. The girl sat with her knees drawn up under her chin.

Seel twisted the lid off the can and dipped his fingers in the salve. "This'll stop that creosote from burnin' any more," he said.

Seel touched the salve to her back and shoulders, and he cursed himself for being clumsy as he almost dropped the can. The girl shivered, caught her breath, then stood still.

"Th-ther-e," said Seel, moving back. "Here. Take the can. I'll turn my back."

WHEN she faced him again, she had his blanket wrapped around her. "I feel much better," she told him, avoiding his direct gaze. "I'd like to know who you are."

"I'd like to know who you are," Seel told her.

"I'm Naida York."

"An' I'm Bill Seel."

"Oh! Why you're the man who arranged to buy part of my Uncle Yap's ranch—before he disappeared."

"Before he what?" Seel blurted. "I heard you, Miss York. An' I don't understand. There's a lot of things I don't understand, y'see. I'll bring up your horse an' we'll head for your place. You can talk while we ride."

He helped her into the saddle and tucked her blanket around her. His attention was careful and considerate.

They rode on, following the line of the river. There was a break in the timber. Naida York waved one hand. "See, over there about three miles? That's the top of Kate Strang's house."

"You mention her name like you feared an' hated her," said Seel.

"I do. Even worse than I fear Corpse Fister. Seel, you will have to watch that devil. He'll carry out his threat to get you."

"I can do some gettin' on my own," Seel grunted. "Corpse Fister, eh? Ain't

he the foreman of Kate Strang's spread?"

"He is. He seems to have more to say about the run of the ranch than Kate Strang does. He and a gunman called Squint Yellow are a pair of killers out and out."

"We kill killers where I come from," Seel said. "I got a nice bunch of beef an' some salty Sooners herdin' them this way. Which reminds me. How about the sale of part of your range to me?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. You'll have to see the bank, in Pronghorn. My uncle owes them money. He dealt in there."

"Which brings us to the question of his disappearin'," Bill Seel said. He scowled. "Why should Yap York disappear?"

"I dont know!" Naida exclaimed. "You see, mister—all right, Bill—we've been havin' trouble with Kate Strang's outfit. They came in here a couple—three years back. First thing, they started crowding free range, buying more range, making it tough for the rest of us. It really had us all worried."

"The Strang ranch—well, it's funny. It runs into the Pronghorn Hills. It isn't healthy for a rider from any other outfit to go in there. The Strang brand doesn't stand for honesty—I'll tell you that! One month, there will be cattle on Strang range that bears brands of outfits not known in this State. Then those cattle just vanish. More cattle show up—with vented or blotched brands as strange as the ones before."

Bill Seel nodded. Muscle rippled along the line of his square jaw. "Yeah," he muttered. "Yeah! . . . Well, go on. What's the trouble over dippin'? Who blew up that vat?"

"The dipping trouble started a few months back. My uncle claimed he found a couple of steers carrying Texas fever ticks. He killed them. Their brands had been blotched until they couldn't be read. My uncle started building a vat. He said he was going to dip, and then aimed to

go after the State to make all the other cattle men do the same."

"I see. The Strang outfit objected because they didn't want State inspectors messin' around up here, checkin' their cattle one by one as they was bein' dipped."

"I guess so," Naida answered. "Anyhow, Corpse Fister told my uncle held see him in hell before he would see him start dipping. Getting all the ranchers in for useless, extra work, Fister called it."

"MY UNCLE ran him off with a rifle. A few nights later, someone poured raw creosote and kerosene on the vat and burned the chute and pen to the ground; my uncle built them back. He and Pap Parker—who is old, and the only year-round hand we have—took turns guarding the vat at night. We were dipping a few head each day—just the three of us."

"My uncle was glad to hear an Oklahoma outfit wanted to come here. He said a tough crew on this range, bucking the Strang outfit, would be a good thing. So it wasn't alone the need of money that caused him to agree to sell."

Seel nodded. The girl went on: "One night, about a month ago, when my uncle was on watch at the old vat, we heard an explosion. Pap Parker and I rode out. The vat had been dynamited; my uncle had disappeared. His horse came home a day later. There was blood on the saddle."

"Sheriff Clint made Kate Strang put her riders at his disposal, and they combed the hills. Pap rode along. He said a bunch of cattle that had been on Strang range a week before, had just vanished. Anyhow, my uncle was never found."

Seel was silent the rest of the ride to the York place. He helped the girl dismount before a weathered four room house. A stove-up old-timer with a mess of gray whiskers came hobbling up from a barn, blinked at Naida in her strange covering and turned to Seel.

"What kind of business is this, stranger?" Pap Parker rapped. He ran a practised eye over Seel's gear. Seel rode an Oklahoma saddle, double-rigged square-skirted, block stamped. Plain dragoon tapaderos covered his rawhide-wrapped oxbow stirrups. Pap looked at the thin, leather-wrapped saddle horn and the coiled maguey rope.

Pap muttered, "A fool hard an' fast man, who sits tied to a boogery steer in postoak an' blackjack country, where you go down with your hoss, or grab a knife an' cut loose—if you can. Fella—" without asking Seel's name—"why didn't you say your name was Seel from Oklahoma way?"

Seel warmed to the old man, who asked Seel to take the saddle off Naida's horse, explaining: "I straint my back liftin' a sack of cee-ment when I was buildin' that new vat."

Naida went into the house. Seel led the girl's horse toward the barn, Pap Parker falling in step with him. As Seel related details of the brawl at the dipping vat, Pap Parker clenched his fists and swore under his breath. His blood commenced to boil.

"I wisht I was a few years younger! he raged. "Fister darin' to tech a hand to Naida like that. Why didn't you gut shoot the coyote, Seel?"

"Maybe later. Figger 'er for yourse'f, Pap, how Corpse Fister felt, ridin' home with that creosote burnin' him."

"I hope it peels him," Pap snarled. "Personal, I'd like to take that Kate Strang an' dunk her in raw dip. Because she's a woman, an' lets him an' that one think she's into love with them, she gits by with things a man'd git strung up for."

"Maybe I'll fall in love with her myself," said Seel.

Naida had come up behind him. She stopped, catching her breath when Seel said he might fall in love with Kate Strang. Naida hurled the blanket at Seel, and it unfolded and settled over his head. He fought out of it and turned.

Naida, head high, was heading for the house.

"Wait!" Seel begged. "I wasn't meanin' nothin'."

"I don't care if you were!" she cried. "Get off this ranch. Go to her you—you Sooner! Don't come back here again."

"Pap, ain't that hell?" Seel demanded, turning to the old man.

"Don'tcha let her or nothin' else stop you from comin' here," Pap advised. "You see the bank, an' then bring your Oklahomy outfit on up here."

"Pap, my outfit has started. Coming slow, too, an' doin' a little work on the way. I'll tell you what I mean, after I go have a talk with this here Kate Strang. Before I go, there's just one question I'd like to ask:

"Have you found any more of them gaunt, hide-sacked walkin' bone yards of steers with Texas fever?"

"Four. I never mentioned it to Naida. I kilt them, an' I burnt the part of the range they was on. Them steers looked like they was lost out of a hurry-up drive. We ain't never been bothered with them Texas fever ticks up here. I don't know what parts them steers come from, either. They had vented brands, an' blotched trail brands. The ownership brands on these last ones was like this."

Pap held his back, knelt, took a twig and scratched in the dirt. "One brand was like this. Other one curlicued up in this way."

"First one you drew, Pop, is a outfit runnin' in Colorado an' New Mexico. That other one is a curlicue—the name of a outfit runnin' in the Texas Panhandle, an' beyond No Mans Land in Oklahoma, into Kansas. The Curlicue has been quarantined on account of Texas fever. The Colorado outfit is tryin' to fight it out."

"How'd them steers git up this far into Wyomin'?" Pap demanded.

"On a highway bein' run by rustlers an' owlhooters that're formin' a chain that threatens a part of the range from Montana to Mexico!" Seel snarled. He

started for his horse. "Pap, can you stand the saddle?" he called back.

"Some. Why?"

"I'd like to meet you in Pronghorn in about three hours. At the bank."

"I'll be there," Pap Parker said. "You act like you aimed to start things hummin'?"

"They're already started," Seel called reply. "An' if a few ideas I got comes right—an' I have my talk out with Kate Strang—they're whizzin' to a blowup mighty soon."

A MAN whose puckery eyelids gave him a perpetual squinty look, turned to stare at Seel when he dismounted by the Strang ranch house. He hooked his thumbs under his cartridge belt and came over to Seel, stopped, teetered on his heels, spat, called Seel a fighting word.

"I'll remember that—just like I seem to remember your face on a reward poster I saw—let's see—in Kingfisher, I think it was," Seel told him, curbing a bucking temper. "I guess your name is Squint Yallow. An' I got an idea you got yellow down your back. You want to argue it?"

"It aint my turn at you," Yallow snarled. "When Corpse gets done with you, I'll have at what's left—if anything. I hope you stick around until Corpse gets back from town. Maybe your mem'ry for reward posters won't stay so good."

Seel shrugged, forced himself to yawn in Yallow's face, and turned to the house. Kate Strang stood back after she opened the door. She smiled flatly, turned and motioned him to follow her.

In a low-ceilinged living room, she turned to face him.

"Long time no see you, Bill," she said.

"That's true," he answered. "Let's see. Last time was in that outlaw dive in No Man's Land. When we started teachin' them owlhooters to keep their ropes an' irons off S-in-a-Wineglass beef, you tried to protect Baron Welke. I re-

member I was beatin' his face with a pistol. You didn't like that, an' you butted in."

A tall, shapely, dark woman, she came close to Bill Seel. "If you'd fallen for me, Bill, like I always wanted you to, I wouldn't got mixed up with Baron Welke's kind. Well, you ruined his looks. I left him, changed my last name and came here. I'm an honest ranch-woman now, Bill. Here, sit down."

Seel sat down beside her on a blanket-covered couch.

Kate Strang said: "I hated to hear you intended moving your Oklahoma outfit here, Bill. There's not room enough on the range. Why don't you give it up? Look—stay here and run this place for me. Leave your stock in Oklahoma. Sell out there."

Bill Seel closed his eyes, not wanting to see Kate Strang; he thought of Naida, sitting in Moonspray River, looking at him.

Kate drew back. "I love you, Bill. Just don't try to move in on this range. You'd have a hard time, any way."

BILL pushed her away and stood up. "Not too hard, Kate. You're thinkin' of quarantines along the trail, ain't you? It was careless of Baron Welke's rustlers to run fevered cattle along the owlhoot chain. Well, that's goin' to be stopped, Kate. I'm movin' my outfit up here because this is better range for me to spread on. I ain't movin' in to be troubled with a rustlin' link as a neighbor. From here to the Mex border, Kate, Baron Welke's got crooked ranchers spotted. Beef is run from Southwest, up in here. It's shifted blotched, shifted again, up an' down the line. Then crooked brand inspectors let the stuff get to market. Now this hand-to-hand passin' of stolen beef has started a spread of disease."

The woman sat and glared at Bill. Bill went on: "You hate me because I turned away from you. You got in with Welke, an' you're still in with him. He sent you

here, at the head of the rustlin' chain, because a woman can get by with a lot more than a man. It's Fister, though, that really runs this spread for Welke! Well, my outfit is comin' on, Kate. Cleanin' up, with the help of local an' State officers along the highroad from here to Mexico. A little Texas tick left a trail for us to follow, Kate. Not only am I movin' in here—but my outfit is gettin' plenty for helpin' mess you up!"

"I got a notion to kill you!" the woman croaked. Her face was harsh, twisted, and Bill knew she wouldn't hesitate to kill if it suited her.

"Go ahead, Kate. But remember, my outfit will come on, anyhow. Tell Fister that."

"Fister's gone in to the doctor. That creosote—"

"It'll preserve his corpse carcass," Seel snapped it. "It—"

He frowned, half closed his eyes as a sudden idea struck him. "Just like it is preservin' Yap York's body, Kate."

"I don't know what you mean!" Kate snarled.

"You will, come time I clean up at that dippin' vat you had ruined with dynamite!"

He heard her swear as he walked out of the room. As he rode away, she came to the door and yelled: "You can't prove a thing, you fool! And you'll find you won't be able to move in up here."

"Don't forget Yap York," Bill Seel called back.

He went on. Pap Parker met him where the trail from the York spread joined the road to town. As they rode on together, Bill Seel told Pap Parker how things stood.

"The rustlin' chain never bothered me much, Pap, until I decided to come up here. It was then I found out about Kate bein' at this end of the line, with Welke on the other end. I told the authorities of six States I'd try to clean things up. My outfit is followin' a Texas fever trail. They're all strung out, waitin' word from this end. When they get it, they'll

have the help of a hundred law officers, an' they'll move in—like that!" He snapped his fingers.

"Yeah," Pap mumbled. "But you ain't proved nothin' yet."

Seel started to mention Yap York, then changed his mind. He'd tilt that hole card a little later. After all, it was just a guess.

AS THEY rode into the little cowtown and tied up at a long hitchrail, Pap Parker said: "Speakin' of that Kate, now. Naida sure did seem maddad a lot. Was throwin' things an' kickin' chairs when I left the house."

"Mad?"

"Well, that—or fallin' in love."

Pap Parker introduced Seel to the banker in Pronghorn. And the banker came right to the point. "You can't buy an interest in the York ranch until it's been definitely established Yap York is dead." The banker sighed. "Believe me, I wish you could. Taxes, interest on notes are eating the place up the way things are now. I had to sell part of our paper on the place."

"To Kate Strang?"

"To Kate Strang, yes."

"If things run on, Naida York went busted, or somethin' happened to her, Kate Strang'd get the place, then?"

"I'm afraid she would."

"Stop bein' afraid," Seel grunted, and motioned Pap he was ready to go.

They went into Ben's bar, had a few drinks, got a bottle, got their horses, and started out of town. Pap cleared his throat. "You reckon Naida'll let you on the spread?" he inquired.

"We ain't goin' to the house, Pap," Seel answered. "I aim to roost out by that old wrecked dippin' vat tonight."

"You fool," Pap yapped. "I got a new one to stand guard over. I told Naida to watch it until I got back—if I was gone when it come night. That other one is done. Why sit an' watch over it?"

"Because I got an idea Yap York is down in that dirt an' creosote an' co-

ment," Seel said. "I got somebody to thinkin'. Told Kate I aimed to dig in the wreckage."

"Bigod!" Pap swore. "Why didn't we think of that before? Yap's horse an' saddle—why they likely led it 'way off, to make 'er seem like Yap was kilt up in the hills. Seel, I'll go git a shovel an' crowbar an' we'll git right at it. If we find Yap, that woman an' Fister an' Yallow will hang higher than kites!"

"Maybe you want that job. I don't," Seel said. "Me—I'd just fill up that vat, all level, an' let Yap York rest right there. I ain't doin' no diggin'. If I'm right, we won't have to. There's the old vat over there. Pile off, Pap. Don't talk. Just wait an' watch. . . ."

A dim-slice of moon, distant stars made a little light. Somewhere a coyote yapped, a rising night wind whispered across the range. Old Pap shivered and started to speak. Seel grabbed his arm and squeezed for silence. Their figures were tense, waiting.

TWO horsemen came toward the vat, vague blurs detaching from the background of the night. They dismounted, untied something from their saddles. The clang of a shovel broke the quietude. Squint Yallow's voice was shuddery when he complained:

"We should've carted him off an' buried him some'ere else. Now we got to dig down an' get him. I don't like it! Why not shoot hell out of that Seel an'—?"

"Wherever he is, he'll come tailin' when the big boom breaks. Which'll be as soon as we get York up. When we bust Seel, we don't know what sorta hunt'll be put up. We can't take chances on York bein' found—since Seel got the idea of looking in this ruin," Corpse Fister answered.

"It boogers a man, havin' to dig down here," Yallow croaked.

"Shut up an' get down in there. Think I'm enjoyin' myself? Ever time I move, or my clothes touch me, I damn' near

keel over. Wait'll the blowup, an' I line my sights on that Seel!"

Before Pap Parker knew what was up, Bill Seel had risen. His gun slithered from the holster and the hammer made a chill sound as Seel thumbed it back. Quick, long strides carried Seel toward the wrecked vat.

"Start linin', Corpse. That, or you an' Yallow come peaceful, both paws in the air."

"Get'm!" Fister bawled at Yallow. Fister faded back, going for his gun.

Seel let his hammer fall, thumbed it back, and dropped it on another cap. The roar of the pistol thundered over the range. There came the sickening sound of lead striking yielding flesh. Corpse Fister cried out. The sound was repeated as Seel fired again. Corpse Fister's rising scream became a burble; he flailed the air with both arms as he collapsed, rolled, kicked convulsively and then was still.

Down in the hole amid the torn planks and cement, Squint Yallow thrust his head up, raised his gun. The dirty flame flashed toward the zig-zagging dark form of Bill Seel. Seel felt the bullet tug at his jacket, threw a shot at the gun-flash and leaped ahead.

Yallow cursed and blinked out the dirt Seel's slug had thrown in his eyes. He leaned back, and a croak of despair passed his lips as he raised his gun muzzle. Bill Seel stood at the edge of the ruined dipping vat. The fire lashed downward from his gun.

Then there was nothing but the excited voice of Pap Parker to rake the curtain of silence aside. . . .

They rode on toward the new vat, then, where Naida was standing guard. "I want her to ride for the sheriff," Seel told Pap. "I'm goin' on over an' round Kate up. She's got to talk—an' I bet she will. I—What's that?"

"Pap? Seel! Hurry, please!" Naida's voice came out of the night ahead of them. Seel swung out of the saddle and ran to the girl.

"Naida!" he exclaimed.

The girl drew a deep breath. Her hands reached out to him.

A dark blotch on the ground near Naida, groaned and moved, then cried out in choked, strangled tones. "Migod, do something for me. I'm burning alive."

"That's Kate!" Seel exclaimed.

"It—is!" Naida panted. "She came sneaking up here, with dynamite in her hands, all capped and fused. I jumped her. I thought for a moment she was going to kill me. And then I remembered, broke away from her, and ran toward the dipping vat. I dropped down, she fell over me and went in head first!"

"Help me," Kate begged.

"What was that shooting?" Naida demanded.

"It was Fister an' Yallow. Seel finished them, Naida," Pap Parker said. "Uh, we know where Yap is, honey. We'll leave him there. It's best that way. Seel can explain it to you."

"Ain't you going to help me?" Kate Strang begged.

"We'll help you, if you'll tell us why you was aimin' to dynamite this vat," Seel grunted. "Why didn't some of your hands do the job?"

"I WANTED to do it myself! Oh, I wanted to see you die! And you got Corpse and Yallow, eh? I might have guessed you'd pull a trick. I intended dynamiting this vat as soon as they came from digging York up to take off and bury in the hills. I thought you'd be at the York wench's place, hear the blast and come here. Corpse aimed to fix you, and make it look like you was killed in a dynamite blast you set off yourself. . . . Now help me! I'm burning alive."

"Stop it," Seel snapped. "You'll get help—if you'll behave, an' go along to

Sheriff Clint with Pap. Your testimony is about all we need now."

"I'll go. But you don't need to think Welke will stop a rustling system that's making us rich. He—"

"By sunup in the mornin', Kate, telegraph wires will have sung the news to men in a half dozen States. They'll move in on ever' ranch along the chain. They followed a trail of Texas fever, Kate. An' Welke an' his men will have lead fever before this is done.

"Pap, you roll Kate around in the water, rope her in her saddle, an' head her in to Sheriff Clint. Then send wires to them places I told you about. Just say: 'Texas ticks,' an' that's all. Those men'll know what it means—an' good-bye to them along the tick trail. Yeah, Texas ticks." Seel chuckled dryly.

He helped Naida mount and rode with his knee touching hers. Behind them, they heard Pap cussing. "Wiggle your hocks in the water while I dab a half-hitch on your horns," they heard him bawl. Seel chuckled. Naida said:

"You—you, you didn't want to help her when she was burned."

"Why no, honey. I sure never did. There's only one little lady that gets salve from me." He reached over, dragged her from the saddle, held her on his lap.

"Salve, indeed, Mister Seel!" she tried to sound angry.

"Well, it ain't really salve. It's the truth, when I orate—"

Oklahoma men were coming up the trail, and this Oklahoma man was glad he'd come on ahead. He could not find it in his heart to hate even a fever spreading Texas tick right now.

"Texas ticks," he muttered. "An' a ranny from Oklahoma ticks, too. I'd just like to see somebody try to stop my clock."

FIGHTING!

BOB DALE

in "COW TOWN
FRAME-UP!"

by BILL
ZELLER

I HATE TO
PASS THIS GUY!
I DON'T LIKE
THE WAY HE
LOOKS AT ME!

ONE DAY, DEBORAH BLAIR GOES
INTO TOWN AND ENCOUNTERS
"GOLDSTRIKE" GALT...THE OWNER OF
THE BIGGEST SALOON...A
CHARACTER WHOM SHE DETESTS!



SHE STRUTS PAST GALT...HER
NOSE IN THE AIR...

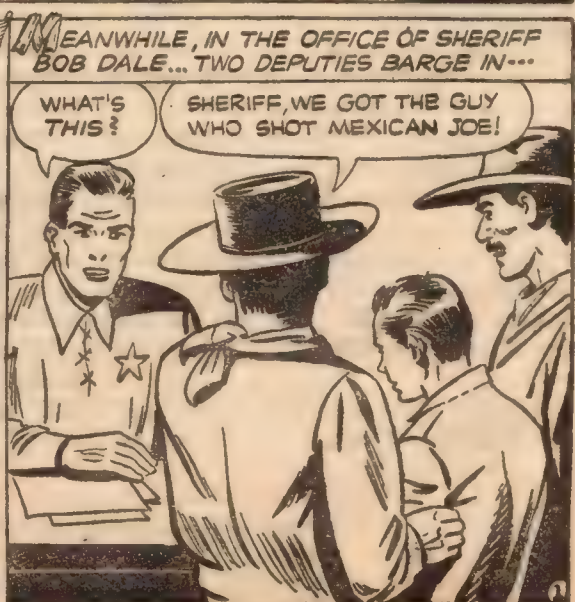
HOWDY, MISS DEBORAH!
YOU LOOK MIGHTY
PURTY TODAY!



MEANWHILE, IN THE OFFICE OF SHERIFF
BOB DALE...TWO DEPUTIES BARGE IN---

WHAT'S
THIS?

SHERIFF, WE GOT THE GUY
WHO SHOT MEXICAN JOE!









THE OLD INDIAN, NAJO, HAS HEARD THE CONVERSATION...

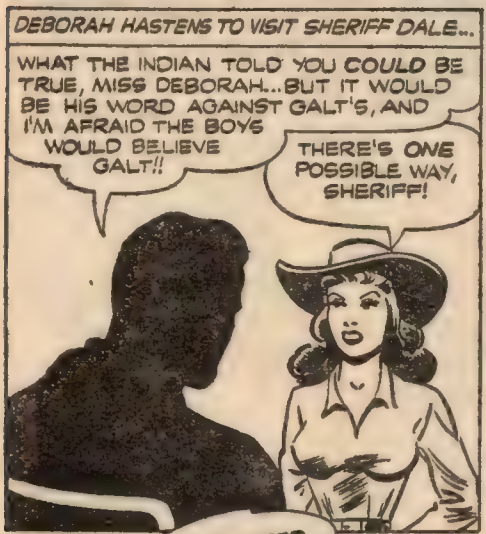
INJUN ALWAYS KEEP MOUTH SHUT! NOW TIME TO TALK TO MISSY DEBORAH!

OH, DON'T BOTHER ME, NAJO... I HAVE WORRIES ENOUGH!



ME SEE MEXICAN JOE KILLED! MAN JUST LEAVE... HIM SAME SHOOT JOE!!

WHAT! SO GALT IS THE KILLER! BUT THEY WOULDN'T TAKE YOUR WORD AGAINST HIS IN COURT, NAJO!



DEBORAH HASTENS TO VISIT SHERIFF DALE...

WHAT THE INDIAN TOLD YOU COULD BE TRUE, MISS DEBORAH... BUT IT WOULD BE HIS WORD AGAINST GALT'S, AND I'M AFRAID THE BOYS WOULD BELIEVE GALT!!

THERE'S ONE POSSIBLE WAY, SHERIFF!



I'LL TAKE A JOB IN THE "BLAZING BAR" CAFE AND TRY TO GET GALT TO ADMIT THE SHOOTING!

ALL RIGHT, MISS DEBORAH... I'LL STICK CLOSE BY AND WITNESS HIS CONFESSION ... IF YOU CAN GET IT!



SOON AFTER...

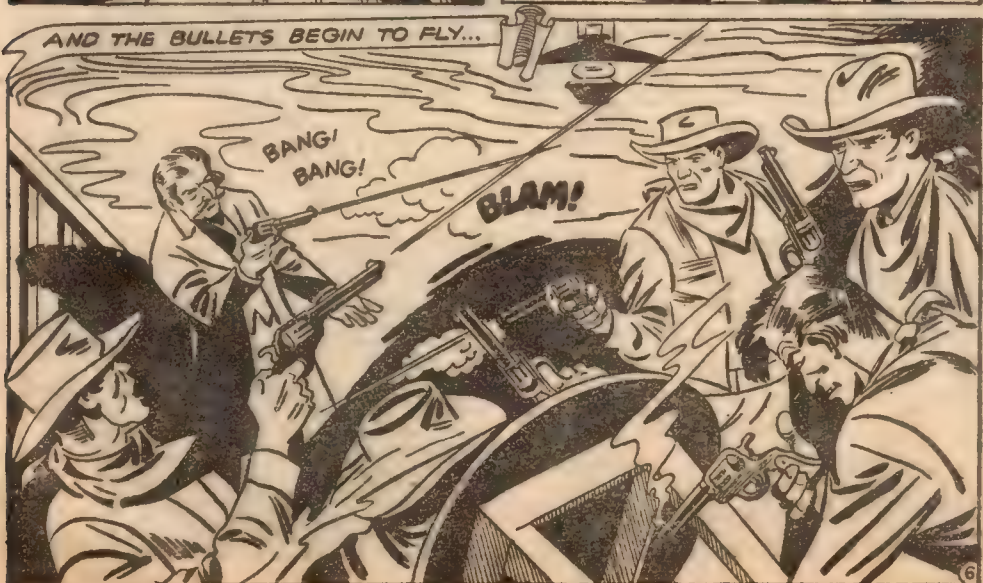
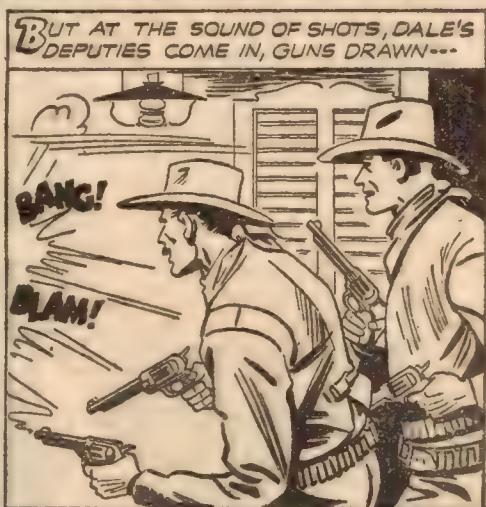
I'M AFRAID I WAS TOO HASTY, MR. GALT... IS THAT JOB STILL OPEN?

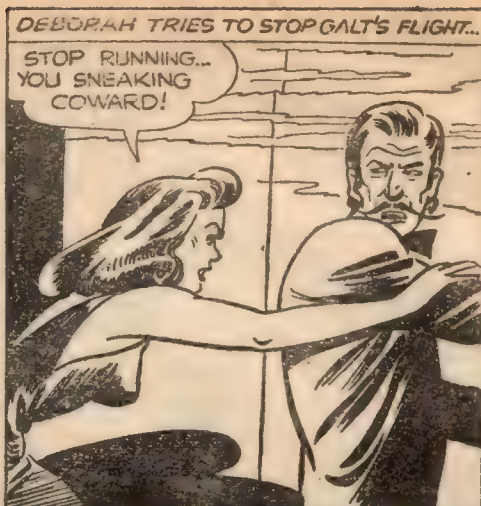
SURE, GIRLIE! I'M GLAD YOU CAME TO YOUR SENSES! GET OUT OF THEM DUDES AND INTO A DRESS!

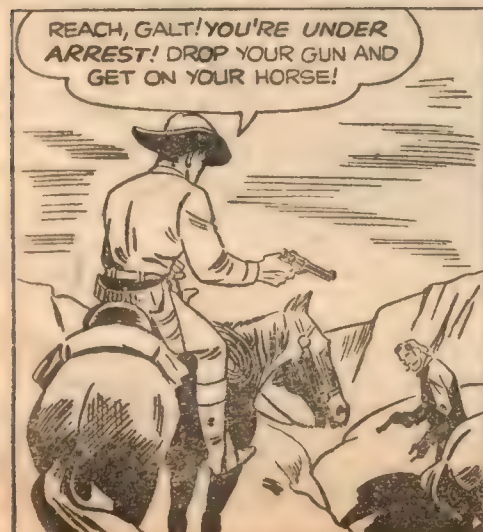


THESE DRESSES ARE SURE PRETTY... BUT THEY'RE AWFULLY RE-REVEALING!









SQUATTERS WELCOME!



"HORNED TOADS an' scorpions! Boss, pull us a spell an' git a hitch on yore temper! Whope! Don't come onto the ridge jest yet!"

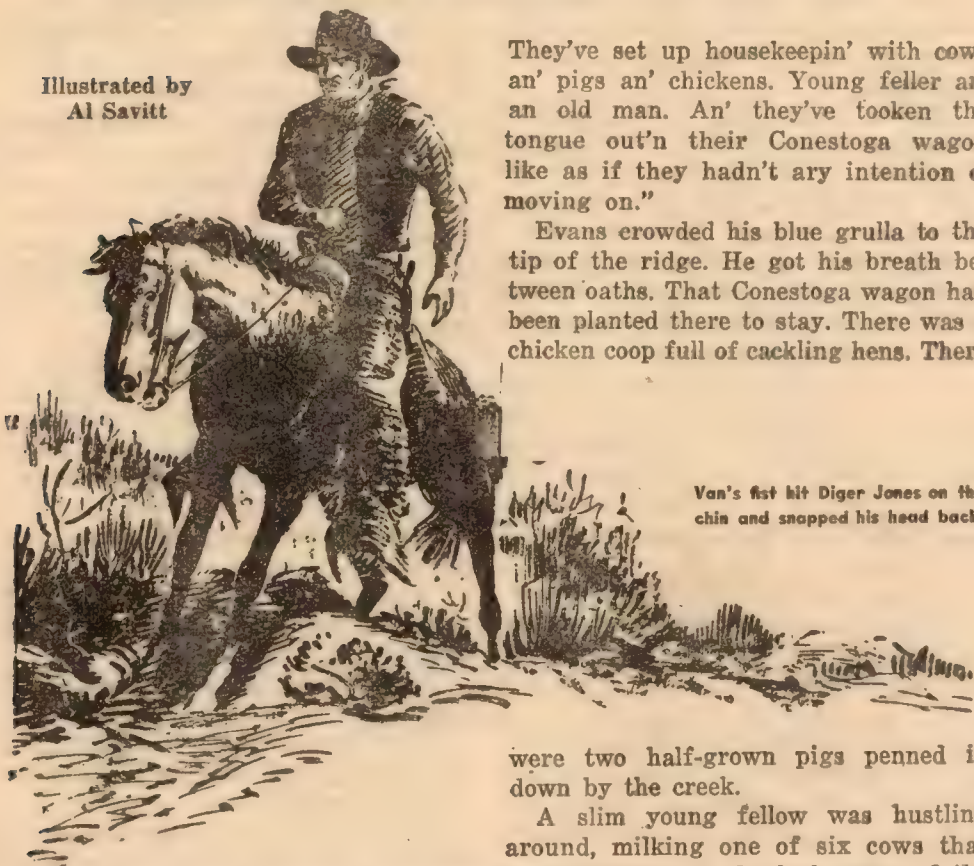
Buck Lansing, the dried-out rawhide

foreman of the Potlatch, pulled his own roan back from the ridge which topped Topanga creek. He trapped the rein of Van Evans' blue grulla just in time to prevent him from seeing what lay beyond the ridge down by the creek.

By RICHARD D. STEELE

It was one thing for Van Evans to order a couple of squatters off his range, but to be told by big Buff Dearborn that he had to do it was far different. When Dearborn began to throw his weight around, Van took the side of Sally Ritter and her old father.

Illustrated by
Al Savitt



They've set up housekeepin' with cows an' pigs an' chickens. Young feller an' an old man. An' they've taken the tongue out'n their Conestoga wagon like as if they hadn't ary intention o' moving on."

Evans crowded his blue grulla to the tip of the ridge. He got his breath between oaths. That Conestoga wagon had been planted there to stay. There was a chicken coop full of cackling hens. There

Van's fist hit Diger Jones on the chin and snapped his head back.

"What in time's bitin' you, Buck?" snapped Evans.

"Don't go for flyin' off the handle, boss," appeased Buck Lansing. "But unless I'm still sufferin' from the hang-over I picked up at Paint Rock a week ago, we're bein' squatted upon."

"We're what?" bellowed Evans whose temper was notoriously short. "Y' mean somebody's campin' down on the creek?"

Buck Lansing shook his head sadly. He could expect Van Evans to explode in the next few minutes.

"Nope, boss, they ain't campin'.

were two half-grown pigs penned in down by the creek.

A slim young fellow was hustling around, milking one of six cows that were feasting on the lush grass of the Potlatch. Evans was burned up. It didn't matter that the Potlatch had about 20,000 acres of the same kind of grass on which Evans was feeding five thousand prime steers.

Evans sent his horse down the hill, followed by Buck Lansing.

"An' what the hell-an'-all yuh think you're doing?" thundered Evans at the slim fellow milking the cow.

The young fellow looked up and it wasn't a fellow at all. It was a gaunted, big-eyed girl whose features showed the wear and tear of the long trail.

"H'lo, mister," she greeted shortly. "We come onto this nice place with water, an' nobody ownin' it, no fences or nothin', so I told pa here's where we stay."

It was indeed a nice place with water. It was the widened pool of spring-fed Topanga Creek where Evans and the Anchor spread, owned by Buff Dearborn, across the creek, watered about half of their stock.

"Here's where yuh ain't stayin'!" rapped out Evans. "Do you know you're trespassin' on the Potlatch ranch? If you're thinkin' o' homesteading, you got to find some dry land and develop it."

Evans tried not to look into the big, solemn eyes of the gaunted girl. With a mite of flesh she would have been pretty. He liked women well rounded.

"But I was thinkin', mister—" The girl's voice faltered. "I've always been told the West was free. If you've got a big ranch here, I don't see where my few cows an' pigs would eat much. One o' our hosses is bad lamed an' pa ain't fitten to go on either."

"Same old bushwah!" yelled Evans. "We git it from every nester an' squatter that comes along. You've got until noon to clear out—"

EVANS stopped speaking as a bent, gray-haired man limped from behind the wagon, supporting himself on a crutch. He saw big tears form in the girl's eyes.

An unpleasant, nasal voice sounded from across the 50-yard Topanga creek pool.

"Hi, you! Watcha tryin' to pull now, Evans? It's your land, but half the water's mine! Pigs! Chickens! You git them lousy nesters off'n this waterhole!"

Buff Dearborn was as tough as they came. He was a big, red-faced man in a loud, plaid shirt. Still his voice always sounded as if he made a foghorn of his nose.

Alongside Dearborn his scar-faced, giant foreman was slouched in the saddle. Dearborn made no secret of it

that Digger Jones had been an owl-hooter.

Three was one thing about Van Evans. He was cross-grained. To order these intruders off his land was one thing. To be told by Buff Dearborn he had to do it was something far different.

"Too bad, Buff!" he shouted. "But I'm puttin' these folks here to stay, maybe to see what shenanigans you might be tryin' next on Topanga Creek."

"That's what you're opinin'!" yelled Buff Dearborn. "Think I'm havin' my water pizen by hawgs an' chickens? An' next they'll be butcherin' some of my calves!"

Van Evans hardly knew what had hit him, except that he was as stubborn a red head as ever rode range.

"They won't be havin' to steal yore half-starved yearlin's," he called out. "I'll see these folks gits all the fresh meat an' other grub what they're needin'. Didn'tja ever hear the West is free, Dearborn?"

Digger Jones's deep, belligerent voice rolled out.

"Yuh'd not be talkin' so danged big-gety if'n yuh was on our side of the creek!"

Ten sconeds later Buck Lansing was pleading.

"Boss! Boss! Where yuh goin'? Yuh can't put yourself under the guns of that gunnie Digger."

But Van Evans had already spurred his horse to the shallow ford below the pool. He was sending the blue grulla kyooting straight at Buff Dearborn and Digger Jones. He was wearing a single six-gun as always, but he made no movement to draw it.

"Great jehosiphat!" groaned Buck Lansing. "He'll git hisself kilt. They've jest been honin' for that kind o' chance!"

Up on dry ground, Evans had the blue grulla into a fast, charging run. The astounded Digger Jones had his big mouth open. Then he started to drag hardware. Still Evans hadn't touched his single gun.

The surprise was all on big Digger

Jones with his guns in his hands. It must have seemed that all the weight of Van Evans and his running horse hit him on the chin with leathery knuckles that snapped his head back and swept him from the saddle.

Van Evans hit the ground as he pulled his horse up short. It was then that Buff Dearborn got savvy enough to try for his gun.

"Lay off'n that iron!" cracked the voice of Buck Lansing from across the creek. "I've got old Betsy coverin' yore brisket and we can save the Potlatch a heap o' grief if I let go."

Digger Jones scrambled to his feet, swearing wildly. He was still trying to bring a gun into action when Evans buried a fist in his stomach. Digger let go with a murderous, skull-splitting blow, his gun still in his hand.

Evans ducked. He was fifty pounds lighter than the Anchor foreman. Moreover, Digger Jones had the reputation of never having been licked by any hombre, either with fists or guns.

• Digger's swinging blow struck Evans on the shoulder. It spun him half way around. Then the redhead owner of the Potlatch appeared to explode. His fists hammered like drumsticks upon Digger's face and stomach.

Evans cracked Digger's wrist with the edge of his hand and took his gun away from him. He slammed Digger on the nose and mouth and the blood ran red.

"I'll kill yuh for this, Evans!" yelled Digger. "I'll cut you to pieces a bit at a time!"

"Start cuttin', Digger!" taunted Evans and put all of his weight behind an uppercut to Digger's chin. The Anchor foreman went down like a poled ox. He didn't get up this time.

"Now rattle yore hocks out o' this, Dearborn!" ordered Evans. "Less yuh're wantin' to be next! An' if they's any move to annoy them folks campin' on my side o' the creek, I'll come an git yuh personal."

Five minutes later Evans was back across the creek. Buck Lansing muttered,

"Yuh ain't got a lick o' sense, boss. Digger Jones won't ever forget that one."

"I ain't wantin' he should," said Evans.

He was looking into two, big shining eyes.

"I don't want—I wouldn't cause such trouble—"

"Buck," said Evans. "You git some of the boys an' start cutting logs for a cabin."

CHAPTER II

Vanishing Cows

SHE said her name was Sally Ritter. Grubbed out over on the Missouri, the spunky girl had loaded all the wagon would carry and started for where she had said, "The West is free."

Pa Ritter had a busted, twisted leg that would never heal. He was, however, a cheerful, chirpy cuss.

"I've tooken to jest leavin' things to Sally," he said. "She's as smart as any boy an' twice as willin'. She said we'd have us a real home in the West."

"Reckon yuh will at that," grinned Van Evans.

Buck Lansing watched Evans' eyes upon the girl, and he got the notion that the boss was exposing himself to another kind of danger.

"Y' see, Sally, this Buff Dearborn, over on the Anchor, has been crowdin' the Potlatch for a long time," Evans told the girl. "He's been wanting I should sell out, 'cause I've got the richest graze an' his Anchor has only ten thousand acres. Some things have happened."

"Like us losin' calves an' a couple o' accidents to our riders whereby it looked like they'd drilled themselves through the backbone," put in Buck Lansing. "Nothin' we could prove, but we have our notions."

"Goodness!" exclaimed Sally Ritter. "An' I thought out here where there was plenty of free land all folks were friendly-like."

Evans didn't refer to his original intention of driving Sally and Pa Ritter off his land.

"Buck," said Evans, "when yuh round up them boys to start cutting cabin slabs, yuh bring along back some side meat, some butter, an' some of Ching Lo's bread."

With Buck gone, in a few minutes Evans learned that Sally Ritter was only twenty. Yet she had slogged a Conestoga five hundred miles. She was down to skin and bones, but Evans could picture the even planes of her clear face with flesh upon it, and her big eyes with a sparkle instead of worry.

He put away the thought. In all of his thirty hard years Red Evans had worked and saved. He had acquired the Potlatch on a quick deal when it was only wild country. That it was now stocked with herds of the finest beef cattle was due to Evans never taking time out for hell-raisin' or romance.

It was dark when Evans, Buck Lansing, and the boys bid Sally Ritter, "Goodnight."

Evans slept fitfully. He couldn't seem to get Sally Ritter out of his mind. He murmured, half asleep.

"The West is free—yup—there's a gal really believes it—"

He heard light running steps come onto the ranchhouse porch. Knuckles hammered at the door.

"Mr. Evans! Oh Mr. Evans! All of my cows are gone!"

It was a good three miles from the creek to the house. Sally's hard breathing proved she had run every step of the way. Evans pulled on his levis. He let Sally in.

"Your cows are gone, you say?" he questioned. "Sure they ain't jest wandered off a piece?"

"No! Oh, no! They crossed the creek. They were driven across. I used a lantern and I can read sign. There were two riders from the Anchor, I'm sure."

Evans was stuffing his shirt into his levis.

They saddled a horse for Sally. Buck

Lansing was the only one Evans called. The red-headed rancher had a malicious glint in his eye.

AT THE wagon he told Sally, "Yuh crawl into yore bunk. You'll have back six cows. Maybe not the same cows, but better ones. Buff Dearborn runs a good strain of Herefords."

"Howlin' kyoots, boss!" exclaimed Buck Lansing. "Yuh mean we're turning cow thieves? Rustlers?"

"Nary one," chuckled Evans. "Fair exchange ain't no robbery."

Evans and Buck rode up the creek quite a piece before they came onto some of Dearborn's straggling young stuff. Before they did, it happened they came onto something else.

This was a ditch. It was wide and deep. Dearborn must have had many men at work upon it for a long time. The ditch was some distance from Topanga Creek. Evans swore and grunted.

"I'm smellin' somethin' cookin' that might be tough to swaller," said Evans. "Up here, Buck, Topanga Creek is all over on the Anchor range. Now if it should happen to be cut off or diverted up here, all we'd have down below would be a dried mudhole."

"Yuh think the polecat would try that, boss?"

"The pizen sidewinder would try anything," said Evans. "But first we've gotta make this cow trade what Dearborn come askin' for."

They were almost back to the creek with six prize yearlings when gun thunder broke out behind them. Evans turned, shooting, but having nothing but the flashes of guns to aim at.

Lead buzzed too close to be pleasant. Suddenly another gun opened up. It was a Winchester repeater. There was a pained yell of surprise from the Anchor riders coming down upon Evans and Buck.

The shooting became too hot for them. They dropped back.

Evans and Buck drove six fine yearling Herefords across the creek. Sally



As the blazing haystack flared up,
Sally saw the figures of four men.

Ritter stood there in the lantern light. "They ain't my cows," she said. "But they're better ones. I hope I didn't salivate any of them riders."

She was cleaning a light Winchester repeating rifle.

"Whether the West is free or it ain't, I'm opinin' you'll git along, Sally Ritter," said Evans dryly. "Thanks for gittin' them gunnies off our tail."

BUCK LANSING said "By hokey, boss! Hell an' all will bust loose when Dearborn spots his cows over here. There'll be lots of trouble—and that's no mistake."

"Since we run onto that funny ditch on the Anchor, I'm honin' to have it bust," grated Evans. "Dearborn's been hirin' on a few gun-swifts. I heard that in Paint Rock. He's about to make some

kind of a play to crowd out the Potlatch."

"Jehosiphat!" barked Buck Lansing. "We ain't needin' gunnies. We've got us a couple-a dozen riders that would fight to the last man for the Potlatch. An' that's better'n all the gun-swifts that can be hired."

"Right, Buck," assented Evans. "An' I'm stickin' here, sort o' ridin' herd on the little lady who thinks the West is free. Yuh git up half a dozen o' the boys an' have them down here. I don't think Dearborn's itchin' for a showdown right now, but they ain't none o' his crew crossin' Topanga Creek."

"I've been thinkin' it over, Mr. Evans," said Sally. "Pa an' me is bringing you too much trouble. It'll be best if we pull up stakes an' light out. In the beginnn' you didn't want us here, an' you changed your mind only because this Dearborn got your mad up."

Evans couldn't understand the chilly feeling that ran along his spine. It was a curious sensation he never before had felt. Perhaps some of it came from the husky warmth of Sally Ritter's voice.

Sally was a tall girl and strong. Her hands were quick and she had cleaned and reloaded her Winchester with all of the facility of a man. Yet her big, solemn eyes were all woman. Her voice softened whenever she spoke of Pa Ritter.

"No matter of differences why I changed my mind," growled Evans. "You an' Pa Ritter ain't leavin' the Potlatch. Yuh got a lamed hoss. You're down to the last o' yore chuck. More than that, I'm wantin' somebody stickin' right here beside this creek waterhole. I'm not so sure Dearborn ain't tryin' to run a ranny."

"Meanin' what?"

"Like stealin' a creek," said Evans. "Buck will be comin' along with some o' the boys. I've a notion I'd oughta have a look-see up Topanga. Keep an eye open, Sally, an' if any son tries to cross from the Anchor, use the Winchester an' don't worry none. If yuh down any o' that

crowd, the chances are yuh are removin' a paid killer."

Evans guided the blue grulla up Topanga Creek to the point where it ceased to be a boundary mark and verged over onto Anchor land. He was trying to estimate the distance to that strange ditch over on the Anchor.

At this point the creek flowed deep, narrow, and swift. Evans knew the land so well that he could judge where a dam would carry the creek down the slope onto Dearborn's spread.

"An' it's damn' sure he ain't diggin' that ditch for irrigatin', seein' it ain't ever been needed in this valley," muttered Evans. "Dearborn knows I've only water enough on the upper meadows for half my stock."

Evans swung over onto Anchor property with the bend in the creek. He rode down below some cottonwoods, sizing up the possibility of how quickly blasted earth and rock could block off the creek at this narrow point.

He did not hear another horse or rider. A loop hissed viciously over his head and arms. Instinctively he attempted to free his arms. The loop tightened around his neck and jerked him from the saddle.

CHAPTER III

Come and Get 'Em

STRANGLING, fighting for breath, Evans was ripped from the saddle. In the semi-darkness he couldn't see who was his attacker. In fact he had no time for observation, for the other man was mounted, probably with the lariat looped over the saddlehorn. He started his horse. Evans was at first dragged along the ground.

By instinct he got his hands on the hair rope above the loop around his neck. It was here that his tremendous strength saved his life for the time. He managed to loosen the strangling loop around his throat. Luckily the rope rode free from the honda ring.

Then his attacker cut across a narrow

bend in the creek. Evans was yanked into the deep, swift water. He gulped down a lot of the creek water trying to catch his breath. The would-be killer was trying to run his horse. That other cruelty gave Evans his chance.

With his hands still gripping the rope, he was pulled to the surface of the creek and managed to get his first breath. Then he was under water again. He was dizzy and sick. His neck felt as if his spine had been cracked. Here the shore of Topanga Creek ran flat for the distance of a mile or so.

Driven to desperation, Evans exerted all of his strength on one hand holding the loop loose around his throat. Still half-strangled by sudden immersion, he slipped his other hand down. It was not luck, for Evans had always carried a skinning knife sheathed in his belt. It may have been but a minute or two, but it seemed like long hours to Evans, before he could extract the knife. Then the movement to bring his knife up forced him to slacken his grip on the rope held by the other hand. The loop tightened again.

Evans was barely conscious when he brought the sharp skinning knife over his head and drew it across the hair rope. He rolled then, going under the swift water of the creek.

His thinking was not clear. He knew that he was on Anchor property. Perhaps it was a madness welling up in Red Evans that gradually restored his senses. He started swimming, weakly at first, then more strongly. He felt himself safe enough in the darkness from any bullets from shore.

By this time his attacker must know that his effort to drown Evans had failed. Evans thought of only one man Digger Jones.

"They want the Potlatch," he thought. "They would kill me to get it. A shootin' would be just a little too raw for what law there is in Paint Rock. Digger Jones handled that rope, but Dearborn's brains was behind it. If I hadn't cut myself loose, I would've been found drowned

in Topanga Creek and who could prove that the drownin' was anything but an accident."

Evans stumbled from the creek only a short distance from where he had left the watchful Sally Ritter. He first heard the gruff, worried voice of Buck Lansing.

"The boss ain't got no more sense than a dang rock lizard! Why in tarnation would he ride off alone, knowin' Dearborn's like as not got every gun-swift on the prowl by this time?"

"Yuh hit the nail smack on the head!" spoke Evans, walking into the firelight in his soggy clothes. "Looks like I'm minus the best blue grulla ropin' horse on this range. Along with a couple hundred bucks o' saddle gear."

"Now what'n all time's happened to you?" grunted Buck.

"Nothing much," drawled Evans, rubbing his throat. "I just went and fell in the creek, that's all."

AS DAYLIGHT came, a bigger fire had been built up, and Evans had fairly well dried his clothes. For the first time in all of his hard years, he knew the touch of a woman's hands that were both strong and gentle. The skin had been rasped from his throat by the tightened lariat. Sally Ritter had found a soothing ointment and applied it. And once again Evans had that chilly sensation along his spine that he could not explain.

A short time later, he carefully placed six of his best riders in certain positions along the creek. It came as he had expected. Dearborn, flanked by Digger Jones with half a dozen very tough looking riders, pulled up their horses on the other side of the creek. Dearborn's foghorn, nasal voice carried across the pool.

"I'm wantin' yuh should bring up them Herefords, and I'm wantin' that you should do it now."

Evans saw that Digger Jones and the other riders were all holding saddle guns.

"Yuh didn't think by this time I'd still be livin', did yuh, Dearborn? If you're wantin' them yearlins', come an' get 'em!"

The "come an' get 'em" had been an agreed signal, and six rifles responded from the rocks where Evans had placed his riders. Kicked-up dust between the feet of the Dearborn horses caused some of the nags to rear and plunge. Digger Jones fired one wild shot, but it was Buff Dearborn who stopped that. Dearborn and his men were on an open clearing, with the nearest rock shelter nearly a hundred yards away. Dearborn had sense enough to see that Evans's boys could have rubbed them out to the last man if they had made an open fight. Moreover, it must have been in the back of Dearborn's mind that his big card to take the Potlatch still waited to be played.

Dearborn called out, "We're pullin' off, Evans, but from here on it's wide open war."

"Which suits me just fine!" Evans grated.

When the Anchor riders faded away in the chilly dawn, Sally Ritter boiled a big can of coffee. She put side meat to frying in skillets over the open fire. As a final touch to the breakfast for those who had suddenly become her friends and protectors, Sally made some golden brown flapjacks, the like of which Red Evans never before had tasted. He didn't fail to hear Buck Lansing talking with one of the riders.

"Hell 'n Mariah!" uttered Buck Lansing. "I'm beginnin' to think the boss'll be turnin' Ching Lo over to the bunkhouse, and be gittin' himself a private cook."

Evans only grinned. He was having some palaver with cheerful Pa Ritter. Pa Ritter was a little man, but except for his busted leg, was as tough as nails.

"How come the busted leg?" questioned Evans.

Pa Ritter smiled. "Y'see, Evans, I tried farmin'. Nearly all my life I been a hardrock man. I guess I misestimated the powder it took to blow out a stump,

and I didn't git far enough away. The stump was busted to smithereens, but a rock layin' alongside it cracked me on the knee fifty yards away. I ain't been ary good since."

"Were you doin' all right on the farm, Pa Ritter?"

"Nope. It was a rocky, stumpy piece of Missouri red clay. Most all it'd grow was weeds. And when Sally took over, she'd not the strength to do the plowin', and take care of the house, and take care of me. So she said we'd just pack up what we had, and hit fur the West where good land was free." Pa Ritter chuckled.

Evans grinned ruefully. "Yuh ain't been here much more'n twenty-four hours. Mebbe so it don't look so free as it did."

Pa Ritter Chuckled again. His face was like brown leather, but he managed to keep it smooth-shaved.

"Can't say we suffered none," he said. "Made a daggone good trade with the cross-bred cows we had. I'm only hopin' Evans, this ain't gonna git you in trouble."

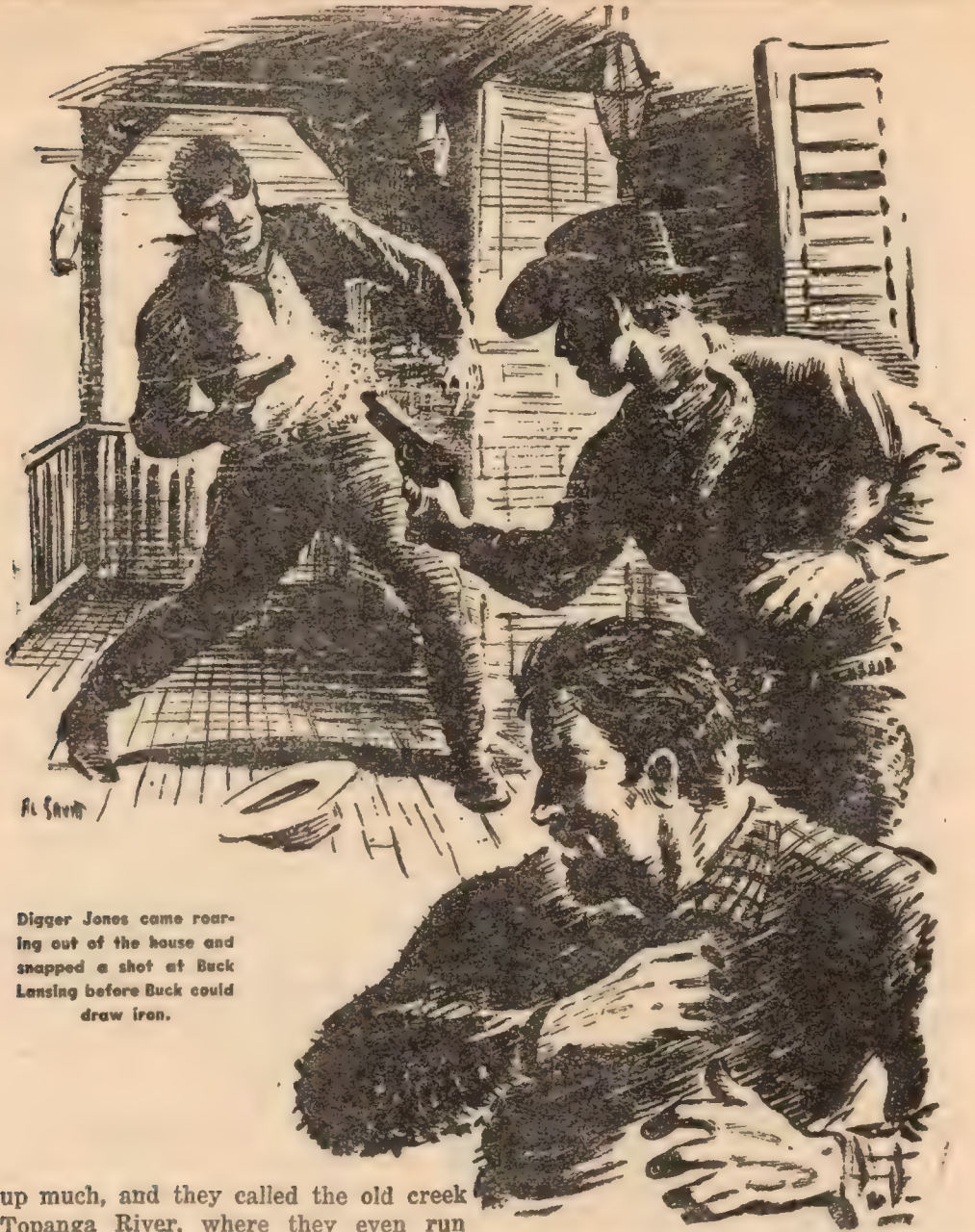
"It won't," Evans said confidently.

"It could! Old Sheriff Roper down at Paint Rock is hell on wheels when it comes to rustlin', I heerd."

BUCK LANSING had been listening, "Yup," agreed Buck. "As sure as sin, boss, we've stuck our necks out. There ain't no way to blotch that Anchor brand on them yearlin's. All Buff Dearborn has to do to git you in jail is to report the same to Sheriff Roper."

Evans laughed, a short bitter laugh. "Buff Dearborn ain't wantin' me in jail. I predict yuh won't hear nothin' more from Dearborn for mebbe a week or so. He didn't plow up and scrape that big ditch for nothin'."

Buck Lansing shook his head. "We kin only wait and see. Seems doggone funny to me. Topanga Creek's always been a steady stream. I been circulatin' in these parts for nigh on to forty years. Remember back when she hadn't choked



Digger Jones came roaring out of the house and snapped a shot at Buck Lansing before Buck could draw iron.

up much, and they called the old creek Topanga River, where they even run boats up the first rapids above where the Anchor now has its boundary."

Evans stared at Buck Lansing. "You said 'run boats,' Buck?"

"That's jest what they did. Pushed old flats loaded with cows down to Paint Rock."

Evans arose. He said slowly, "Buck, I don't think Sally and Pa Ritter will be bothered, but keep at least six riders

down here all the time. I'm takin' a little pasear down to Paint Rock."

CHAPTER IV

The Hay Burners

BUCK LANSING, that tough, old, rawhide foreman of the Potlatch, scarcely permitted Sally Ritter out of his

sight during the following week. He had watched the quickly formed interest of Van Evans in the pioneer girl who believed the West was free.

"Might or might not come to suthin'," he said to one of the riders. "But that gal's a'ready cut the boss's temper down a dozen notches. An' have you noticed the gal?"

"Sure 'nough have," replied the rider. "Never thought a gal's bony face could git so soft and purty in so short a time. An' while she's still worritin' about Dearborn and his gunnies, still her eyes have suthin' in them that wasn't there when she landed here a week ago."

That was what Buck Lansing had been observing. It seemed all a miracle what a week of good food, of friendship, of the rising of a cabin that was to be Pa Ritter's home and her own could do to a girl's looks.

Her brown hair was no longer straight and drab. It had become fluffy and glossy. Her cheeks were beginning to show pink where they had been drawn and white.

She came over to Buck Lansing just before evening chuck time.

"You think Mr. Evans will be back soon?" she said, anxiety in her voice. "I don't put anything in dreams, but last night I thought I was trying to put out a big fire. An' I run down to the creek, an' there wasn't any water there."

"Guess yuh must-a been hearin' a hoot owl in yore sleep, Sally," ventured Buck. "An' owl or a kyoot yelpin' gives me nightmares."

"But this seemed so real," persisted Sally. "I wish Van—I mean Mr. Evans, would git home. I'm thinkin' somethin' about to happen."

Buck wouldn't admit it, but he had the same feeling. Evans had sent back strange word from Paint Rock by a rider.

"Going on to where Topanga Creek empties into the Big Muddy. Home in about a week. Hope nothing breaks while I'm gone. Keep a close watch on Sally and Pa Ritter."

"Now why in tunket would the boss be goin' all the way to the tail end of Topanga Creek?" Buck Lansing had grunted, not guessing that he himself had supplied the reason for that trip.

Sally was nervous during supper, but she whipped up a good lot of chuck. It was dark when she was washing the tin dishes that were used with the roundup wagons.

Buck and six riders were jawing around the fire. Guns cracked out. The shooting sounded from up Topanga Creek, but over on the Potlatch spread Buck and the riders hit their hulls as one man.

"No!" cried out Sally. "It's a trick, I'm bettin'!"

But they didn't hear or heed her warning. With ready saddle guns the Potlatch crew pounded toward the sound of the shooting.

Sally heard other horses. This happened so fast she had no time to reach her wagon and her Winchester. Four Anchor riders tore across the creek ford. The water flew high under their running horses.

The intruders were fast disappearing toward the ridge above the creek before Sally had her rifle. Sally caught up her one good horse. She mounted bareback, guiding him with a hackamore. She held the Winchester gripped in one hand, no telling what might happen.

She lost the Anchor riders about a mile down the ridge. Then she cried out, "I dreamt about a fire. That's it. The haystacks." A dozen stacks of winter hay were ranged along the ridge, dimly visible ahead.

Sally had no glimpse of the Anchor riders until a light flared up. A haystack at the end had been fired. The quickening blaze threw the figures of four men and their horses into view.

Before Sally could act, a Potlatch rider named Simms, pounded past her on his running horse. He had been sent back by Buck Lansing to look after Sally while the others went on to investigate the queer shooting.

WITH the flaming of the haystack, Sally had no doubt but that Buck and all the other riders would see the trick and be hammering back. One Anchor rider was already running to another stack with a blazing torch.

Simms, the Potlatch rider, yelled and rode straight at the firebug. Two guns blazed out. The Potlatch rider threw up his hands, twisted in the saddle, and was dead before he hit the ground.

"You dirty killers!" screamed Sally, having the good sense to slip from the back of her horse to the shelter of ground darkness.

Her Winchester cracked. The man running with the torch slid to his face. He had fired his last haystack, put his last notch in his gun.

The three other Anchor riders were puzzled for a moment. Then they started some fast shooting. But it was guesswork. Sally had moved swiftly to one side. The men were outlined between her and the burning stack.

Her second shot removed one of the three permanently. The remaining pair evidently were not accustomed to that kind of shooting. They swung to their horses.

But there was another rifle shot and one of the fleeing riders disappeared toward the creek, clinging desperately to his horse's mane. Sally ran over to the fallen Potlatch rider. A scarlet blotch on the front of his shirt told the story.

Sally Ritter uttered neat, round oaths.

"If Van Evans don't git Buff Dearborn, I'll do it myself!" she cried out fiercely.

Such was the girl's strength that she lifted the dead rider across his saddle after she had caught up his horse. As for the pair who had paid with their lives for this murder, Sally ignored them. Hot tears were rolling down her cheeks as she rode into camp.

She was just in time to meet Buck Lansing and the other riders returning. Buck swore wildly. Then he showed his smartness.

"Jehosiphath!" He roared. "They suthin' wrong about this whole business. It ain't like Dearborn to start a hay-burning war."

"Yuh have somethin' there, Buck," put in Pa Ritter. "Maybe so while yuh was runnin' your hosses an' listening to shootin', and while Sally went after them skunks that burned the stack, they was somethin' yuh missed. An' it was meant yuh should miss it."

"What in tunket yuh mean, Pa Ritter?"

"The ground jolted and there was a rolling sound like muffled thunder, Buck I'm an old hardrock man, as I've said. That jarrin' an' thunder was an a'mighty heft o' powder bein' set off. That's what yuh was supposed not to hear. But I heard it."

"The lowdown, pizen sidewinder!" belowered Buck. "Fellers, I'm for ridin' onto the Anchor an' salivatin' every livin' rat!"

Pa Ritter shook his head.

"I'm only advisin' but I'd wait for Van Evans. You'd be ridin' right into hot guns waitin' for you to pull-something like that. Buff Dearborn hopes that explosion wasn't noticed. We'll be knowin', come morning, how much shale an earth's been dumped into Topanga Creek. From the jolt of the explosion, I'd say tons of rock are now blocking off the water from reaching the pool here."

Buck walked down to the creek, came back cursing. The Topanga Creek water-hole had already dropped two feet.

CHAPTER V

Lost Topanga Creek

VAN EVANS rode down to the camp in the late evening. His rugged face was bleak, and his red hair seemed to stand on end. But there was a deep glint in the depths of his gray eyes, a gleam that told he had learned something he was not letting go of right now.

"The so and so sons—!" he started out when he was told of the burning of the

haystacks and the killing of young Simms, the rider. He launched into a lurid string of oaths, but looked at Sally Ritter and tried to pull up short.

"Don't mind me!" said Sally. "You should have heard the lingo I spilled when put young Simms on his horse and brought him back."

"You felt bad, Sally, about drillin' them Anchor skunks?"

Sally laughed, shortly, bitterly. "On the contrary," she said. "I did a lot of swearin' because I missed the other two."

Buck Lansing was watching Van Evans with a speculative eye. It didn't seem to Buck, that the boss was too greatly concerned about the worst thing that had happened. By this time, late evening, what had been the cattle-watering pool of Topanga Creek for nearly half of the Potlach herd of five thousand steers, had dried to little more than a thin, muddy trickle at the bottom of what had been ten feet of clean creek water. Van Evans walked down and looked at the pool.

Buck Lansing said, "For the love of lizards, boss, there goes half our herd. We jest h'aint got the water."

Pa Ritter had hobbled along on his crutch.

He said, "They set off an all-fired, big bunch of powder, well planted. They practically turned the shores of Topanga creek in that narrow neck yuh spoke about, Evans. All they have to do now, is some shovel work, fillin' in, and this whole shebang becomes a dried-up mud-hole."

Still Van Evans grinned.

"What in time's got yuh, boss?" growled Buck Lansing. "Yuh know what that means to the Potlatch? No water for our herd, an' you'll have to let go of half the twenty thousand acres of the Potlatch to Dearborn, or p'raps it'll be some townie who'll do the slick dealin' for Dearborn."

"Well now," said Van Evans slowly. "I don't reckon I'll be sellin' out."

"But, boss!" rapped out Buck Lansing. "Ain't we goin' over an' git them gunnies

that fired that stack and drilled poor Simms?"

"All in due time," said Evans quietly. "Our steers can make out for a day or two. Mebbe so, there'll be a cloudburst. Yuh never can tell, in these hills, where a sudden storm is coming from. We ain't ridin' into no gun fight, with a bunch of paid owlhooters. Yuh know I went all the way down to the Big Muddy, saw some funny things down there. They'll be interested down there, when what they call Topanga River, begins to show slack water."

"Boss," pleaded Buck. "I'm sayin' our boys are rarin' to go and smash the whole kit and kaboodle of that Anchor outfit."

"I think," said Evans, "that by this time, Dearborn is all set. He's got at least a dozen more paid gun-slicks than he had forty-eight hours ago. I'm not runnin' my boys into a hornet's nest. It would be suicide."

Buck snorted with disgust. Arguing with Buck, Van Evans had failed to notice that Sally Ritter had slipped away. He guessed she had gone back to the camp to cook up some chuck, but when he and Buck reached the camp, Sally was not there. Neither was Pa Ritter nor their unlamed horse.

Evans stormed around calling Sally's name. It was fully dark now and no answer came back to him. He had a hunch. He made a circle of the camp. He reached the soft dirt shore of what had been Topanga Creek. Then the violence of his cursing stopped even Buck Lansing.

The mildest thing he said was, "The damn' fools! What do they think they can do?" For he had read sign. There were the tracks of the horse. There were the imprints of Sally's moccasined feet where she had apparently walked beside the horse. She and Pa Ritter had headed straight up the drying bed of Topanga Creek.

"All hands!" rapped out Evans. "Get your nags! We got to get to them two fools 'fore they run straight into a ruckus."

WHEN the Potlatch riders mounted, Evans led a full dozen of them up Topanga Creek. They had gone less than a quarter of a mile when the ground under them trembled and jolted. There was a muffled thundering sound.

"By all the little gods!" exclaimed Evans. "They've gone and done it! I should have kept in mind that old Pa Ritter was a hardrock man, and that Sally ain't human. She would figure that this was the only way she could pay off for what little kindness we have shown her. Hold up, boys! Listen!"

It came with a swishing roar. It was the crest of muddied water rolling back down into the dried bed of Topanga Creek.

"And after I took all that trip," Evans moaned, "and when I've got Dearborn right where I want him, they had to do that."

The creek was filling again. There was no doubt as to what had happened. Sally, directed by old hardrock Pa Ritter had undoubtedly blown the guts out of the blasted dam with which Buff Dearborn had choked Topanga Creek only a few hours before. Evans put the riders on the double. With readied rifles, they swept over onto the Anchor spread.

Evans' guess had been correct. The Dearborn blast had caved in both shale rock shores into the narrowest section of Topanga Creek. The pent-up water had been started rolling down the slope toward the big ditch on the Anchor property, but now it no longer flowed that way. It poured through the gaping hole that had been dynamited squarely out of the middle of the sudden dam.

Evans pulled up. He looked all around. There was no sign of life on the Anchor spread. Then a quavering voice came through the darkness, on one side.

"Evans, for God's sake! We shot their dam, and they took Sally away!" Pa Ritter's voice broke as he talked.

"How'd it come about?" demanded Evans.

"Mostly my idea," said Pa Ritter. "I had a box of powder in the wagon. Jest

brung it along in case there might be some stumps to be blowed. Sally went for it. I wired together two dozen sticks of dynamite. I short-fused one to one minute of time. Sally got me on to the horse. I carried the dynamite. When we got up here, we could see two guards at a fire across the creek drinking. The dam looked pretty solid. I told Sally we've got to split 'er plumb in the middle."

"And," said Evans, "there was only Sally to plant it?"

Pa Ritter nodded miserably and said, "Damn this leg! Sally climbed out there without bein' seen. She planted enough power to blow hell out've the whole hill-side. It was only when she lighted the fuse that the guards spotted her. Sally had one minute. She couldn't get back the way she had come. So she climbed to the top of the dam and found herself blocked by the rough rocks. All she could do then was run. She crossed the dam and ran right into the guards. I seen one of them grab her. Then all hell broke loose. I was blown off my feet. Jest then I see the guard throw Sally across his horse. That's all, Evans."

"We're ridin' back to camp," said Evans. "This may seem cold, but it'll have to keep 'til daylight."

CHAPTER VI

Mad Red Evans

EVANS' eyes were bloodshot. He hadn't slept. He had sat before the low cook fire nearly all night, his hands clasped over his knees. Buck Lansing kept him company, only Buck paced about. Buck wanted action. Sometimes he couldn't understand what made the boss tick.

An hour before sunrise a dozen Potlatch riders were cleaning and oiling their saddle guns. They were looking to their short irons. Their horses were caught up, saddled, and waiting.

"It's about three miles to the Anchor
(Continued on page 119)

Gunsmoke in

SILVER FACE McGEE paddle-footed his way through the slatted doors of the Off Trail whiskey mill. The restless movements of his almost toothless jaw on a cud of tobacco slowed to a stop as his small blue eyes blinked several times to make sure that he was seeing correctly.

A six-two giant came bursting

through the rear door, six-shooter in hand, and spun the first man at the bar around. Quickly and none too gently, he let go of the first man and meted out

Illustrated by
H. W. Kiemle



By
KARL R. KASKY

Big Dave Patterson was on the trail of the man with the scar when he picked up a faithful helper in Silver Face McGee. Even when a beautiful, mysterious female joined them, McGee was right on the job when trouble threatened — which was often!

Coffin Corners

Dave's six-shooter bucked
in his palm and the man
pitched into the street.



the same discourtesy to the next. On down the line of men he went, spinning each around and glaring into their faces while his six-shooter stared at their bellies.

The last three men turned nervously and even raised their hands slightly when the man approached. It was apparent that he was looking for someone and whoever that someone was, had better not be bendin' an elbow this night. His metallic gray eyes promised death and his six-shooter itched to provide the free ticket to hell.

At the end of the bar the man turned and surveyed the remaining occupants. All scrambled to get their hands on the table in plain sight. All except Silver Face McGee who still stood at the door watching the stranger with more of a curious eye than a fearful one.

The man took long strides to the door, glancing only indifferently at Silver Face as he went out. Outside he pulled the reins from the tie rack and swung aboard his claybank.

A cracky voice halted him. "Why yuh got yore bristles up, son?" Silver Face asked.

The claybank pranced before the tie rail as the rider waited for the old man to approach. It was dark and the man leaned forward in his saddle to get a better look at the bewhiskered old man. "He wasn't in there, was he? Maybe yuh got here too late."

"Who?" the rider asked.

"The man you're lookin' for," Silver Face answered.

The rider said nothing as if he knew that the old man had more to offer. "I saw a man ride out of town 'bout an hour ago. Sure was in a powerful hurry, too."

"Which way?"

"Now just calm down a bit, son. I'd kinda like to go along with yuh if yuh don't mind. I know those hills out there better'n most people, especially strangers."

Turning the claybank slowly, the man rode out of town at an idle gait.

A few seconds later a boney paint sided him. "Yuh'll like this desert air. Might even cool yuh off a bit," Silver Face murmured into his beard.

They rode silently for a few minutes before Silver Face asked. "Yuh got a name, son?"

"Dave," the rider answered curtly.

"An' the rest?"

"Patterson," Dave bit back again.

"Mine's Silver Face. Don't need much explainin' does it?" the old man laughed while rubbing his bushy face.

"We couldn't catch a turtle with a broken leg at this rate. Let's stretch out," Dave urged.

"Ain't no use. We're not gonna catch anyone tonight. Not in these hills and by tomorrow morning we'll be in Coffin Corners."

The moon slipped above the hills and scattered a flood of light among the rocky buttes, towering like petrified giants against the horizon. Expertly, Silver Face threaded his way between the buttes, continually keeping to the hills instead of trailing through the valley and offering some drygulcher a better target.

Past midnight, they stopped at a spring and watered their mounts. Dave couldn't help but laugh at the old man's tall tales of adventure. It seemed to him that Silver Face considered himself sort of a man of the world. To hear him tell it, you'd think he had been everywhere and there wasn't anything he couldn't do. However, at the spring, Silver Face stopped talking about himself and began to pry Dave with personal questions.

"Who yuh lookin' for, Dave?" he asked bluntly.

"Don't know his name. Just know what he looks like. That's enough to find him," he answered confidently.

"What does he look like?"

"Big and square, like a box, and big hairy hands. He had a scar from the corner of his mouth down to his chin. Looked like a piece of string was caught in his whiskers. That's about all I can think of except I'll know him if I see

him again. He can't get rid of that scar."

"So that's why you were lookin' all those fellers over back there. Figured yuh had him cornered in that saloon."

"I still don't get it. I know he stopped there, because I saw him ride in that direction and I was sure that I'd catch him washin' down the dust. It just don't make sense why he left so soon. He didn't know I was on his trail."

"No?" Silver Face raised his voice.

"No, I was gone when he killed my partner. He rode up one morning and asked for breakfast. We fed him and after breakfast I went to look for some strays. When I came back, my partner was lying in the yard with a hole in his head. I never considered him trustworthy, so I got to thinkin' that maybe he gave the man a bill-of-sale for our stock and then got plugged over the deal. Figure he might have tried to change partners but the other guy decided it was better to own all instead of half."

They rode on silently for awhile, both thinking of what could have happened. Dave cuffed his hat back and looked at the old man. "How's come you decided to ride with me. You must be lookin' for trouble."

"Nope, just lookin' for a job. A good job."

"You came to the wrong man," Dave said.

SILVER FACE shook his head. "Don't think so. I figure on bein' yore *segundo* when yuh get that bill o' sale back. Yuh seem to fergit that I know a little bit 'bout everything, includin' cows. Them critters ain't seen the day when they can outsmart ole Silver Face McGee."

Dave couldn't hold back the smile that forced itself upon his thin lips. "What do we do first, *segundo*?" he laughed.

"First we go find Hairy Joe Mitchell. He's the man with the scar, and the same one I saw ride out of town. He generally hangs out at the Golden Gar-

ter Saloon in Coffin Corners, so I reckon we'll be seein' him soon."

Shortly before sunup, they entered Coffin Corners. The sprawling, unpainted buildings gave no indication of life at this time of the morning. A dog raised its head and growled at the intruders as they rode down the main street, and roosters had just begun their heralding of the dawn. Dave dismounted in front of the Cattleman's Hotel. "Reckon we can get somebody up?" he asked.

"Don't much care," Silver Face answered. "I like the straw better'n those squeaky springs. But you go right ahead and get a room if yu've a mind to and I'll take the nags over to the livery."

Silver Face left with the ponies and Dave tried the door only to find it locked. Determined to get a bed to sleep in, he called loudly for the proprietor. After the third "Hullo there!" he heard a man cough painfully from a second-story room. Raising the window, the coughing man leaned out. "Don't you have no respect for folks with the asthma," the man wheezed.

"Sorry," Dave smiled, "but I'd sure like to have a bed to throw these two hundred pounds of mine on."

The man took a string with a key on it from around his neck and dropped it to the walk. "Help yourself to the first empty one you can find," he said slamming the window shut.

Dave entered and decided to try the upstairs first. Numbers ten and eleven were locked. Twelve vibrated with heavy snoring but thirteen creaked open on rusty hinges. He heard someone stir and retreated to the hallway, but not before a shoe glanced off his shoulder. Picking up the shoe he moved on to fourteen. Cautiously he entered, taking no chances this time. Satisfied that he was alone in the room, he struck a match and lit the candle on the dresser.

He stared at the shoe while blowing out the match. Thoughtfully, he turned the small shoe and finally a funny grin broke through. He wondered what he

would have done if he had known that it was a woman's shoe a few seconds ago. Dropping it into a dresser drawer, he removed his holster and hung it on a chair near the bed. Erasing the events from his mind, he slept soundly for the next ten hours.

When he awoke, the sun was in the west. He shaved and brushed his sombrero, then descended to the street. His first objective was a restaurant where he sipped a cup of black coffee. After finishing the coffee and twisting a cigarette, he dropped a coin to the counter. He bent toward the waitress as she picked it up. "You know anybody who has a scar from here to there?" Dave asked while running his finger from the corner of his mouth to his chin.

The waitress stared at him coldly for a second, then turned away. "Thanks," he called after her, then left.

He rolled the incident around in his mind. It was certain that she knew who he was speaking of. If she didn't she would have flatly told him so, he reasoned.

HIS gaze riveted on a large saloon across the street, which covered a half of the block. The front had been recently painted and a huge sign with the words "Golden Garter" was nailed to the second story porch. He moved across the street and shouldered through the batwings.

The room was almost empty and enjoyed little business for a place of its size. A man with shifting, deep set eyes sat at a card table facing the door. His legs were crossed and a long black frock coat hung down on each side of the chair. A thin black mustache extended too far across his pinched face and a large amber stud nestled in the folds of a red cravat snuggling at his throat.

"Come on in," the man invited while pouring a stack of poker chips from one hand to the other absently. "Just because we're not rushed is no reason to think we don't give you a good drink for your money."

Dave took the chair opposite the man and watched the clinking chips slide back and forth in the man's hands. "I'm Lou Jaccliffe. I own this water hole." The man snapped his fingers and the bartender came to take their orders. After the bartender left, Jaccliffe asked, "What will it be? Poker? Blackjack?"

"Neither one," Dave shook his head.

"Always thought cattlemen were gamblers," Jaccliffe laughed. Dave's eyes widened at the remark, wondering how Jaccliffe knew he was a cattleman. "Don't be shocked," the gambler said. "It sticks out all over you. What brings you here? Buying or selling? Or just after a good time?"

"Neither one," Dave said again. Arching his eyebrows he asked, "Why do they call this town Coffin Corners?"

"There aren't many folks who don't know the answer to that. I guess you're one of them. It all started about ten years ago. Several men came here from the East and started buying cattle. My business was gambling so I set up this combination saloon and gambling hall. One night four hombres came in who lost heavily at my roulette wheel. When they demanded their money back, they might as well have called me a cheat."

Jaccliffe's dark eyes narrowed and little sparks seemed to dance in them. "I put them all in a coffin," he stated bluntly. "And just to set an example for other aspirants I planted one at each corner of the town. There's the name for you. Coffin Corners, with dead men to prove it."

"No trouble since?"

Lou Jaccliffe shook his head. "I don't think anyone is eager to have me start building a circle with their bones."

EACH man took a sip of the whiskey that the bartender had deposited on the table. Snaking a silk handkerchief from his vest pocket, Lou Jaccliffe wiped the alcoholic moisture from his lips. "What brings you here?" he asked again.

"I'm lookin' for a man who has a scar down his chin. Know anyone like that?"

"Do you?" came Jacliffe's evasive answer.

"I call him Hairy Joe Mitchell. He's sort of a gunny. . . ." Dave's voice trailed off as he saw Jacliffe's eyes raise and his head shake slightly from side to side. Quickly he kicked the chair out from under himself and spun toward the swinging doors. The top of a sombrero slipped out of sight and the sound of rapid footsteps came to him.

Bounding to the batwings, he stepped out on the boardwalk. A big, square-shouldered man was taking long, hasty strides down the walk a block away.

"Mitchell!" Dave barked crisply. The man wheeled on his heel, pulled his gun and fired recklessly. As the slug ripped splinters from the under side of the upstairs porch above his head, Dave's six-shooter bucked twice against his palm. The barrel of the man's gun made a downward arc toward the walk and slipped out of his hand, as he pitched sideways into the street, his sombrero cartwheeling along the ground.

Rolling the man over, Dave saw the tiny scar from mouth to chin. Hastily, he searched the man's pockets. The bill-of-sale was not there. He raised up and stared glassily at the gathered crowd, hardly seeing them, only feeling their presence.

A middle-aged man grabbed Dave's arm and said, "Looks bad, son. Better let me get you behind bars. Quick."

"Just a minute, sheriff," a cool voice broke in. "I saw the whole thing. This man shot Mitchell in self defense. Better that you get the wagon and give Mitchell a decent burial," the man said shoving a wad of bills into the sheriff's fist.

"Okay, Mr. Jacliffe. Your word's good enough for me," the sheriff replied as he turned back to his office. The crowd dispersed, leaving Dave and Jacliffe standing alone. Dave's gaze locked with the one coming from the dark eyes of the gambler. "Tell me Mr. Jacliffe," he said. "What happens when you run out of money?"

As Dave returned to the hotel, Silver

Dave knelt in front of her and slipped the shoe onto her foot.



Face sided him. "That wasn't a very smart thing to do," he grumbled into his beard.

"I guess you think I wanted to kill him," Dave fired back hotly. "All I wanted was to get that bill-of-sale back peacefully. He didn't leave me any way out when he threw down on me."

"Just the same yuh killed off yore only clue."

Dave halted at the foot of the stairway. "I'm going up and do some thinking. See you tonight."

Entering his room, he raised the window to let fresh dry air blow in and replace the steamy heat of the day. Dragging a chair to the window, he sat down and used the sill as a footstool for his

boots. He built one cigarette after another, vaguely aware that he was chain smoking.

Adding things up he reached a definite conclusion. That Hairy Joe Mitchell was working for someone other than himself. He was gone now, the only one he knew who could tell him where the bill-of-sale was. Not only that, Mitchell certainly had some friends in town and in that case he would be walking the street like a clay pigeon from now on. The only thing he had accomplished was the avenging of his partner's murder, which he didn't particularly give a hoot about anyway.

THE sun slid behind the desert edge turning the vastness from a bright red to an inky purple. The clanking of spurs and scraping of boots on the walk below became monotonous to his ears so he moved to the bed.

A few hours later he eased over on his side as he heard the door of his room open. Soft footsteps coming toward the bed stopped his breathing. Silently he slipped his six-shooter from its holster and waited.

"You wouldn't shoot a lady, would you, Mr. Patterson," came a low husky voice from the darkness.

Feeling no danger, Dave stepped to the dresser and lit the candle, then pulled the shade. Turning, he made no effort to keep his gaze from wandering up and down the girl's almost floor-length black dress, heavily ruffled and lacey. Long ebony lashes shaded her dark green eyes and made Dave's jaw drop open for an extended second. She pushed at the auburn hair which nestled against her white shoulders as she smiled at him through lips as perfect as any Dave had ever seen.

"I'm Katy Norris. I came for my shoe," she explained.

"Without knocking?"

Katy sat down in the chair near the window. "I didn't intend to disturb you but I see you're a light-sleeper."

"Go ahead and make yourself right at

home. Throw your feet on the window sill if you like. Here build yourself a smoke," he said, throwing his makin's in her lap.

"I just want to be sociable," she purred. Katy opened the tobacco sack and took a paper from the book. "I guess you think I can't twist one."

Katy was poised, ready to lick the cigarette when Dave reached out an arm and grabbed her. Yanking her to him roughly, he kissed her hard, full on the mouth. Minute brown flakes of tobacco from the open pack in Katy's hand fluttered down over their heads like a small snowstorm. At first she struggled like an animal caught in a trap and tried to push his head away, but slowly she relaxed and placed her arms around his neck.

As roughly as he pulled her to him, Dave pushed her away. "That's what I thought," he laughed.

Katy's forehead wrinkled. "What do you mean?"

"That shoe isn't all you're after. Who sent you? Why?" Dave's fingers closed tightly over her shoulders digging into the smooth white flesh. "Come on. Out with it. Who sent you?"

Katy held her stubborn silence as Dave released her and paced the room. "Mitchell's friends," he muttered. "They want you to help them get me." Wheeling toward her, he fired a broadside of words. "How? When? Where? Where, that's it. They want you to take me somewhere so they can sling a chunk of lead through my skull."

Dave continued his pacing and the pitch of his voice ascended to an almost maniacal tone. "That's fine. That's fine," he said rubbing his hands together. "Let's not keep them waiting."

HE BLEW out the light and led her to the hallway. "Where to, baby?"

"Since you're so smart, you tell me," her voice snapped like the hammer on a six-gun.

They walked to the street, neither one speaking. Dave let his right arm

swing close to his six-shooter as his eyes glanced from side to side trying to pierce the darkness alongside the buildings. Occasionally, a parked wagon held his attention, but close scrutiny of every detail revealed nothing.

Turning up a side street past the livery stable, she tugged at his arm. "Not this way," she said softly.

Dave pressed forward through the darkness faster, taking lengthy strides. Suddenly he jerked rigid and whipped out his gun as the sharp crack of a rifle split the evening air. Leaping near to a building, he pulled Katy with him. The dull thud of something heavy hitting the ground came to him. Narrowing his eyes, he searched the shadows for some sign of life but nothing moved. His nemesis was playing safe.

"Over this way," Katy said pulling at his shirt sleeve. They eased forward along the splintered boards until Dave's boot hooked on an object lying across the walk. No one needed to tell him that it was the body of a man.

In a single motion, he bent down, fished a match from his pocket and thumbed it to flame. Cupping his hands over the glow, he held it near to the man's face. The contorted expression of death on twisted lips grinned up at him mockingly. "You know him?"

"Yes," she said hoarsely.

"Who?"

"Bart Brazel."

Darkened windows transformed into squares of amber light up and down the street. Shortly after, footsteps and excited voices could be heard coming up the walk. Terminating their conversation, they hurried down an alley, circled by the livery and returned to the hotel. Katy stopped in front of Room 13. Dave stared at her for a long moment, then said coldly, "Thanks. We'll go walking again sometime."

Approaching his room, he saw candlelight flowing out from under the door. Remembering that he had blown out the light when he left, Dave drew his six-shooter and kicked open the door. An

old man with a bushy white beard sat on the chair near the window.

Reholstering his gun, Dave entered. "Where in the hell've you been?" he asked.

"Here."

"How long?" Dave asked suspiciously.

"Yuh got me there," Silver Face chuckled. "I never owned a watch."

"Seems to me you've been ridin' herd on me a little too tight lately."

"Meanin'?"

"Meanin' you followed me tonight and shot that drygulcher up the street."

"I guess yuh'd rather have got that slug between yore eyes."

"Look, Silver Face. I knew that guy was waiting for me. If you hadn't got so trigger happy I'd have caught me a gunny who might've been able to lead us to the bill-of-sale. A hot clue falls out of the clouds like an angel and you have to come along and clip its wings."

"That makes us even then. Yuh ruined our first lead and I bobbled the second."

DAVE sat down on the edge of the bed. His head seemed to throb with thoughts of what had happened to him since he arrived in Coffin Corners. He rested his jaw on his palms and mumbled, hardly moving his lips. "Let's forget it. Maybe something else will turn up."

Silver Face said nothing, but suddenly, Dave snapped his fingers and his eyes brightened. Quickly he sprang from the bed. "I got it! The girl. She could tell us who sent her to get me tonight."

"Yuh reckon she would? Didn't seem to me like you were makin' much headway with her."

Some of the sparkle left Dave's eyes as he realized that Katy *had* been hard to talk to. Shaking his head, he said, "I don't think you could thrash it out of her if she didn't want to tell you on her own hook."

"Yuh mean to say that a big, pretty
(Continued on page 122)

BULLETS FOR A

Alone in a deserted trading post with one white girl and an Indian squaw, Dan LaRue made every bullet count in a desperate fight to save his furs from being stolen and the women from a horrible fate in the lonely wilderness.

MOCCASINS braced in the mud, Dan LaRue pulled on the thick elkskin thong, slowly pulling in the log. The force of the muddy, silt-filled Missouri River fought him, and he pulled harder, leg-muscles protesting. Lashed to that log was his winter's catch of peltry gained by trapping in the High-woods.

Behind him, its pine-wall visible over

the high buckbrush, was Fort O'Donell, about a quarter-mile distance on higher ground south of the Big Muddy. But big Dan had no eyes for the trading-post. He was intent on landing his plews. He had worked hard enough for his catch.

The winter had been tough, thereby insuring thick coats on the wildings, and in the plew-bundle were many fine mink and marten, not to mention a silver-fox

Illustrated by
R. Morton



BUCKSKIN MAN

pell. Water dripped from Dan LaRue's beard.

He had swum the Big Muddy, now rampant with flood-water, the elkskin rope trailing behind him as he had fought the vicious under-tow. He had clambered up on the muddy bank, shook

himself like a wet beaver, and then had started towing the log, and his furs, across.

The log lurched, rolled with a wave, then came into calmer water. Dan LaRue pulled it on the bank, unlashed his soaking pack, and coiled up the elkskin rope,

By
LEE FLOREN



Dan grabbed the man's skinny shoulder, twisted him around, hit him a blow that sent him reeling.

tying it around his middle, above the belt holding his skinning-knife and Army Colt. He was slipping into the buffalo-hide shoulder-straps of his pack when a man said, "Howdy, stranger."

Dan turned, straps sliding into place. He had looked forward to again seeing Old Man O'Donell, the post-factor, and more than the Old Man, he had wanted to see Sharon O'Donell, the Old Man's daughter.

But this man was not Old Man O'Donell.

He was as big as Dan LaRue, but where Dan was blond, this fellow was dark, swarthy with long black hair that came to the dirty buckskin jacket covering his muscular shoulders. And where Dan was twenty-two, this man was about fifty, Dan figured.

The man's sudden voice had disturbed Dan LaRue, driving a sudden shaft of anger into his usual good-nature. A man had no right to come so unexpectedly on a trapper that-a-way through the brush. But Dan LaRue compromised with the idea that perhaps he was a little jumpy.

He'd spent almost eight months alone in the Highwoods.

"I'm Dan LaRue."

The man took his eyes off Dan's pack. "My name is Harr Wilkins, LaRue. The Ol' Man has been lookin' forward to meetin' you. He done mentioned you'd prob'ly be the first trapper in."

"Had an early Chinook back in the Highwoods. Fur started to slip so I figured I'd hit in. Been a week on the trail."

"Stopped at the squaw camps, huh?"

DAN didn't like that statement, but he decided to let it ride. Evidently Harr Wilkins was a gent hired by the Old Man. Dan LaRue suddenly thought of Sharon—Sharon with the green-gray eyes, the Irish glibness, the shiny red hair the color of a sleek red-fox pelt. He started to swing onto the trail that led from the Big Muddy to the post.

The brush stirred. Another man came out of the thick kinikinick and wild

rosebushes. Dan stopped, something warning him.

This man was thin, almost too thin, and dirty greasy buckskins hung to his slab-like shoulders. A fox-pelt cap sat on a small, pointed head, almost hiding eyes as sharp as those of a trapped coyote. A scar ran along his right cheek, deep and red, old but still marking the whiskery face. For the first time, Dan LaRue got the impression these two had been hiding in the brush, watching him ford the Big Muddy.

"Who t'hell are you?"

The thin man tried to say something, but Dan heard only guttural croaks, sounds but not words. He realized, then, this man did not have a tongue.

Harr Wilkins said, "This is Fox Raymond. Somewhere, he lost his tongue." Wilkins shrugged. "Some say Apaches."

"Somebody'll kill him," Dan growled. "He'll come in behind some trapper an' get his belly full of steel or lead."

"He's harmless."

Big Dan LaRue didn't like this at all. For one thing, he knew Old Man O'Donell well, and it didn't seem logical that a man of O'Donell's type would hire two men of this low frontier caliber.

For Dan had been teethered on a steel trap here in the Montana Wilderness. And he recognized a frontier tough when he saw one. And suddenly he remembered a talk he had had with an old New Mexico trapper down on the Wind River Rendezvous some four years ago.

"He's a tough hombre, Dan, an' they run him outa Colorado. Wears his hair long, 'cause the Navajoes cut off his left ear, an' he hides the scar with his hair."

Dan remembered just that wisp of the conversation, and he had not paid much attention to that. So little attention, in fact, he did not remember the name of the long-haired man the old trapper had been talking about.

But Dan LaRue pushed these thoughts into the discard. Many men wore their hair long here on the fur-frontier. But still, he didn't like the looks of this pair.

"You lead the way," he said.

Harr Wilkins went ahead, but Fox Raymond stayed behind. Dan stepped to one side and motioned Raymond to go ahead. The mute stopped, acting like he did not understand Dan's gesture. Dan grabbed his skinny shoulder, twisted him around, and hit.

The blow sent Raymond toward Wilkins, who had watched. Wilkins caught him, steadying him; Fox Raymond had his hand on his knife, there in the buffalo-hide scabbard. He had dropped his rifle.

Dan said, "No man travels behind me."

He figured that Harr Wilkins caught the edge of his suspicions, but if such was the case, Wilkins' eyes did not show it. He pushed Fox Raymond ahead, snarling, "I've told you time again not to come in behind a man!"

Raymond growled, something, a hoarse croak, hand still on his knife.

Wilkins pushed him. "Get back to the post!"

Fox Raymond pulled his gaze from Dan, gave Harr Wilkins a long look, then turned and walked toward the trading-post.

Harr Wilkins made apologies. "Sometimes I think he's addled. I've tried to convince the Ol' Man he should get hid of him."

Dan LaRue nodded. He seemed uninterested. These two had put on an act, and it had gone over well, but not too well. Wilkins turned, going down the moccasin-packed trail toward Fort

Dan followed.

DAN LARUE ran over the set-up in his mind, then decided he was jumping at conclusions, and hasty conclusions, at that. Old Man O'Donnell was getting old, he must have been almost into his seventies, and when a man gets older he loses his sense of judgment slightly, both in evaluating danger and judging men. For if these two wanted to kill him, they would have murdered him from behind while he had pulled in the log bearing his furs.

That was it. He was just imagining

things. He'd lived too long, alone in the wilderness. Well, maybe next winter Sharon would be with him, and her surname would not be O'Donnell, but LaRue.

This drew a quiet smile to Dan's close-shaved lips. He had tidied up quite a bit to see Sharon, even to painfully scraping off his growth of winter whiskers. Now, at the fort, he'd don clean buckskins, packed down between the furs in his pack. He had tied the furs down tightly, placing the buckskins between two wide beaver pelts that would keep them from getting wet, for he had reckoned the Big Muddy would be hard to cross, flushed as it were with run-off snow-water.

The compound was deserted, but Dan laid that to the fact that most trappers had not yet left their winter grounds. They went into the store with its lines of canned goods, the barrel containing rice, and the odor of dried meat.

Dan asked, "Where's the Ol' Man?"

"We had tough luck." Harr Wilkins spoke quietly. "But the Ol' Man's got smallpox."

Dan felt the brush of fear. Smallpox had wiped out many an Indian camp, killed redskins by the hundred, and he himself had never had smallpox.

"Where is he?"

"Back in the end cabin."

"Where's Sharon? Hope she ain't sick."

Sharon, according to Harr Wilkins, had gone down the river a few days ago, when the Old Man had gotten sick. She had gone to Fort Benton for the medico.

"She oughta be back any time," Wilkins said. "You ever have smallpox, LaRue?"

"Never have."

"Then we'd better dicker right off, an' get you on your way. 'Cause it'll kill a man nines time outa ten. I had it down in Texas. When I was a kid. Reckon Raymond here has had it, too. We cain't catch it again."

Raymond nodded, tongueless mouth agape.

"Where's the squaw?"

"The cook? Oh, she left with Sharon."

Matt nodded, hiding his seriousness. He and Wilkins and Fox Raymond were the only three men, outside of sick Old Man O'Donell, at this wilderness trading-post.

"Spread out your plews," Wilkins said, an' we'll dicker."

DAN didn't answer for some time. He was doing some mental debating. He didn't like this pair and he didn't like this set-up. Sharon was at Fort Benton. He could trek on down the Missouri and meet her when she returned, or he could find her in Fort Benton. He got the impression these two, if they were on the level, would be shrewd traders. And if they were not on the level—well, he'd blundered into a trap.

"I'll think it over."

"We can meet an' beat Fort Benton prices," Wilkins reminded.

"Did I say I was goin' to Fort Benton?" Dan LaRue's voice was hard. "I sell my furs where I want to, Wilkins."

"Maybe you won't sell them."

The words were low and ominous. Dan turned suddenly, distracted by Fox Raymond's movements. Raymond had been inching in behind him. Dan brought up his gun, reading the evil in Raymond's bearded face, and for an instant he had his back to Harr Wilkins.

Wilkins' rifle came down, a falling club. Dan glimpsed it, jumped slightly; the barrel crashed into his shoulder. His bullet took Fox Raymond, but the rifle, ripping down, swung Dan's aim. He saw Fox Raymond go back, though, and he sensed, rather than saw, he had shot the man in the left shoulder.

Then, he was lurching ahead, falling under the rifle. Anger was with him, deadly and hot, and this anger took him out the door, aided by the blow of the rifle. He had been lucky; he had not gone more than ten feet into the room. His shoulder ached like it was broken, making his left arm useless.

"Get him!" roared Wilkins.

Raymond's knife suddenly whammed

into the door-casing. Dan caught the glimpse of it vibrating. He was out the door then. So far, he had been lucky, but if he ran across that compound—

A bullet. A bullet in the back, pitching him forward there on that moccasin-packed soil . . .

This thought, urgent and pounding, checked his lunge, brought him against the trading-post's rough log walls. For a moment, despite his aching shoulder, calmness held him. Reason told him neither Raymond or Wilkins would barge out that door. They would walk into his gun if they did. He sent out a shot, lead ripping into the casing.

Wilkins repeated, bellowing the words, "Get him!"

Dan LaRue's head was clearing rapidly. He knew he could not stay here long. The trading-post had a back door and they'd come out that and circle the building. He ran along the wall, came to a cabin, and went behind it. A bullet hit a log overhead.

He glimpsed Fox Raymond, pistol in hand; he sent a bullet toward him. He realized, grimly, he had dropped his rifle, back there in the store. But he still had his plews.

Raymond ducked back behind the building, and Dan knew he had missed. He thought this over, running all the time, heading between the aisle left back of the cabins—a short distance of about fifteen feet between the cabins and the log-wall of the fort.

The wall was too high to scale. His only chance lay in getting outside the fort. By this time, he figured Wilkins and Raymond were across the compound, heading for that gate, too. And if they got it closed with his inside—

Up ahead, he heard a clang, and wood met wood violently. And Dan LaRue stopped, fear riding him. They had beaten him. They had closed and locked the gate. He was a prisoner in this stockade.

"We got him trapped, Raymond."

Dan remembered the elkskin rope. He

ripped it loose from around his waist, made a hurried loop, and cast at one of the stockade's jutting uprights. The loop settled, Dan jerked. Then it came free again, for it had not caught fully around the log.

"He's back this way, Raymond!"

Moccasins made little noise. A man could cross that compound on the run, and the sound of moccasins would be a dim whisper. And he knew, as sure as he was alive, they were closing in, even if he could not hear them.

He knew their plan. They would enter a cabin by the front door, cross it, and shoot through windows. His surprise attack had given him a minute or so of chance. Now those minutes were running swiftly to their conclusion.

A GAIN the loop rose, and again Dan jerked. Hope speared through him, for the upright was caught securely. He started walking up the logs, moccasins digging toe-holds, weight braced out against the rope. His heavy pack made his progress slower.

But luck was with him. He glanced back, halfway up the wall, and saw no sign of either Raymond or Wilkins. But if they broke into that alley— He would be suspended, a good shot.

Then, the elkskin rope broke.

Dan was almost to the top, with freedom in sight. He grabbed out, a desperate gesture, but there was nothing to grab. He remembered falling, spinning backwards to the sod, and he remembered the ground rushing up. His head whammed into something.

At first, he thought either Raymond or Wilkins had slugged him. Later, he found out he was wrong.

The light was dim. First, he felt for his pack, and found it gone. He was sitting down, sod rough on his back. He tried to get up, head unsteady, but two firm hands pushed him down.

"Sit quiet, Dan."

A hand came in, rough and horny, and held his mouth. The two other hands



When he came to, he felt a hand over his mouth. "Be quiet, Dan," she whispered.

were still on his shoulders. He was sitting again, and his eyes and ears were getting back their old sharpness. He realized that he was among friends.

The hands on his shoulders belonged to a girl. He could see her uncertain outline. The hand on his mouth belonged to a dim, bulky shape. Then his ears heard moccasins overhead.

Memory washed back, and he remembered his fall. He figured he was in a cave. His ears told him why the hand had come over his mouth. For moccasins shuffled overhead. That meant he was in a cellar under a cabin.

He had fallen against the cabin where Old Man O'Donell had been in bed with smallpox. But who had pulled him under

the cabin? And how had they gotten under it?

"Be quiet, Dan."

They were not words; they were a whisper. He caught the scent of a woman's hair, and relief was his. He shook his head vigorously and the hand left his mouth.

"Sharon." Another soft whisper.

"Yes, Dan."

Dan leaned back, taking this into him, and judging it. So Sharon had not gone to Fort Benton, and they had lied! The other bulk would belong to the squaw.

He had been right in his assumptions. Harr Wilkins and Fox Raymond had either killed Old Man O'Donell or had him prisoner. They had come in and taken over Fort O'Donell by force.

"He ain't in any cabin." Harr Wilkins' growling voice.

A guttural sound. That would be Fox Raymond.

THE moccasins moved across the flooring overhead. Dan was relieved when they finally went out the back-door. He heard Wilkins say, "By hell, he must've got over that wall. He must've busted his rope, right near the top. He's grabbed onto the pilin' an' gone over, then thrown his rope back. We go outside an' look for tracks where he landed."

Dan waited. He could hear the squaw breath heavily. Finally he asked, "How did I get in here?"

Sharon sat near to him, mouth close to his ear. "We dragged you in, Dan. We were in the cabin. Then, when your rope broke, you hit the timbers with your head. Then Lazy Eagle and I drug you into this cellar."

"You heavy, Dan, but we move fast. Your furs, they over in corner."

Dan grasped the squaw's wrinkled hand and squeezed. He put the thing together, fitting the puzzle slowly. Evidently neither Raymond or Wilkins knew about this shaft under the cabin.

"But the Ol' Man—up over us—He's got smallpox!"

Sharon's voice was hollow. "Dad is dead. They murdered him the first day they came, three days ago. He's buried up along the river."

Dan LaRue felt a sense of loss. He had liked Ol' Man O'Donell, for the old factor had been like a second father to him. But there were still some pieces that did not fit in. He put one of these into words.

"Why didn't they back-shoot me, when they come on me pullin' in that log carryin' my plews?"

Sharon had the answer. "When they murdered father, Lazy Eagle got me, and we went into this cellar. Dad had built it in case of Indian attack. The outer mouth leads into the brush beyond the stockade. The inside entrance is in this cabin overhead. Dad hid it well, and they've never found it."

Dan repeated, "Why didn't they shoot me?"

"Why?" Dan never knew the girl's voice could be so bitter. "They were afraid we were in the brush. And they knew if they shot you, either Lazy Eagle or myself, hiding in the brush, would kill them."

Dan mulled that over, eyes closed. His head was slowly settling. The damp smell of earth was good.

"So they wanted to lure me into the post, huh? They figured you two are outside of the stockade, and they could murder me inside without you two step-pin' in. I owe my life to you an' Lazy Eagle."

Sharon continued. "That was their deal, Dan. Both Lazy Eagle an' me saw you come in. We tried to get to you an' warn you but Harr Wilkins got to you first, so we had to hold back."

"I was lucky to get away, Sharon."

Dan thought some more. Evidently Wilkins and Raymond never knew that Sharon and the squaw could come into the compound. Sharon told him the pair had come to the post, cold-bloodedly shot down her father.

"But they can't hold the post," Dan

reminded. "Trappers will come in, a number in a party, and two men can't rob ten."

"They don't intend to hold it, Dan. They want to only rob a few single trappers, like you, and then pull out."

This sent new fear through Dan LaRue. Maybe Harr Wilkins and Fox Raymond, seeing their jig was up, would make a break for the wilderness, and once in the thick brush, nobody could find them.

This had run against them, and they had a good stake evidently, stolen from the murdered Old Man O'Donell.

"Has Wilkins only got one ear?"

Sharon said, "I don't know. Why ask?"

"He only got one ear," the squaw said.

Dan said, "An old trapper told me about him. He's done this before, the old trapper said. We gotta work fast. I lost my rifle back in the store. You two got rifles?"

"One, Dan."

"Any shells?"

"Just five."

DAN said, "That's enough. I got my short-gun, too." He reloaded his pistol, fingers clumsy in the dark. He picked up the rifle. "Now you two stay here. How do you get outa here?"

"Go ahead, down shaft."

Sharon grabbed his sleeve, fingers steady. "Dan, I'm gettin' a rifle; I'm goin' with you."

"No."

"Yes."

Dan twisted her by the shoulders, and she bit his hand. He pushed her down beside the squaw. "You keep her here, Lazy Eagle. You hear me, squaw?"

"I hear."

"They killed my father, Dan."

Dan said, "Please, Sharon, stay here. Do it for me." He kissed her roughly.

"All . . . right."

He left them, moving stooped down the channel, and came to its end. His shoulder went up, bulling the planks up, and it ached afterwards, for it was the

shoulder that had taken the rifle. He came out into a room and he was under a bed. He pushed it to one side, and it yielded grudgingly. He crossed the room, clubbed out an oilskin pane with his rifle, and looked into the alley where, but a few minutes before, he had fallen when his elkskin rope had broken. He looked at the huge knot his head had hit.

No wonder he'd been knocked unconscious.

Nothing moved in the alley. No sound, no trace of either Wilkins or Fox Raymond. Were they still outside the stockade? He tried to reason through this, breech of the rifle open, and he snapped the lever, kicking in a new shell. He jammed the cartridge he had rejected back into the magazine.

Then, through his jumbled thoughts, came a thought with star-like clarity. If Wilkins and Raymond did pull out, they'd get their booty first. And that booty, logic told him, would undoubtedly be in the store.

They had left the cabin, intending to go outside the stockade, and he knew they had gone with guns only. He slipped in between two buildings. A bullet hit him in the groin.

The shock caught him, almost dropping him. Then he realized he had forgotten something. Each corner of the fort held a look-out station where a man roosted when Indian trouble threatened. And the bullet had come from the one to the southeast.

Another bullet came, the report loud, but by that time Dan LaRue had gotten behind a wall. And no cry came from the look-out box. That meant, then, that Fox Raymond was stationed there, and Raymond was making guttural animal sounds against his tongueless mouth.

Dan waited, watching the edge of the tower. He waited for what seemed an hour, blood trickling inside his buckskins. But he paid the flesh-wound no heed.

(Continued on page-126)

GUNS MAKE THE



"Drink it afore I pistol whip you," Grimes told the waiter

HIS coffin-shaped face was grim from effort, and his lips moved as he laboriously wrote on the hotel register, SIMON BOLIVAR GRIMES, ESQ. That done, the kid from Georgia rushed the straw-colored cowlick from between his china-blue eyes, and flipped a goldpiece to the counter. When he counted his change, he said to the clerk, "Beg your pardon, suh, there's a dollar shy."

"That pays for a month's subscription to the Gazette."

Grimes hitched up his belt, which was weighted by a pair of Colt .45's. "I got a Nick Carter book in my war bag; I ain't staying longer'n for to have

NEWS

By T. E. SOAMES

The editor of the Broken Axe Gazette tried bluffing, but that was a sort of typographical error. When the smoke cleared, the editor was dead and Simon Bolivar Grimes had become a journalist!



Illustrated by
Newt Alfred

my hoss shod; and I don't want your dang paper nohow. What makes you think I want to read it?"

"Bub, you can't bed down nowhere in Broken Axe 'thout you subscribe." He

gestured toward a printed notice on the wall. "It's a municipal ordinance."

"Then gimme my money back. I ain't staying."

"You done registered," the clerk objected.

As though pulled from the air, a .45 blossomed in the gangling kid's ham-sized hand. The speed of the draw froze the clerk, and the next move finished the job: Grimes clipped him with

the long barrel, and leaned over the counter to dip his gold piece from the till.

He wondered what luck he'd have getting a meal. Next door to the hotel was a restaurant whose window was lettered, AMY'S CAFE: HOME MADE PIES A SPECIALTY. The girl behind the counter was blonde, violet-eyed, and cute as a bug's ear; her smile was sweeter than anything in Broken Axe had a right to be.

"M'am, gimme half a dozen eggs, and a steak the size of a saddle blanket, and one of them pies."

"Gosh, you must be hungry!"

"And tired, and disgusted." He noticed a copy of the *Gazette* on the counter. "Do I have to subscribe to that dang-blasted paper afore I get any vittles?"

Her smile dimmed, and a shadow seemed to veil her lovely face. "Maybe they'll think of that next—" Then, as she slapped a steak on the griddle, "This'll be done before they can pass another law."

The sudden bitterness of her voice told Grimes that he wasn't the only one who was riled by Broken Axe. He glared at the *Gazette*, and at the irritating slogan at the mast-head: "BOOST THE PLACE WHERE YOU LIVE, OR LIVE IN A PLACE YOU CAN BOOST." The editor was Wayne Gordon; the owner and publisher, Amy Linden. "M'am, how come your name or the bill of fare's the same as the female polecat that extorts travelers into subscribing!"

"My dad ran the paper until he died, and it's barely paying enough to meet the interest on the notes he signed while he was ailing. So it's being managed by his creditors."

"Um . . . you sorta own it, only you don't."

"I don't! And it makes me squirm, whenever I think of how dad loved that paper, and how it's gone to the dogs!"

She choked, and tears filled her eyes. Once she had dished out the grub, Amy

turned from the counter to fuss around in the kitchen, Grimes, glancing at the *Gazette* couldn't find the news for the clutter of political articles; except for the superior court judge, the incumbents were running without any opposition.

When he paid for his meal, Amy asked, "Where are you staying tonight?"

"I'm bedding down with the coyotes and rattlesnakes."

She sighed. "Well, dad was a man of principle, too, only his lungs got him before he was shot."

Grimes brightened. "I can shoot a little. Maybe if'n I teamed up with the editor that's mismanaging your paper, he'd have more time to tend to business."

"You take my advice," she countered, "and step easy, or get out of town. Exery saloon is a deadfall."

Grimes straightened up. "M'am, I been wiping my own nose ever since I was no taller'n a musket barrel."

SO HE went into the Elkhorn Saloon, and began grumbling about Broken Axe and its extortion. The bartender, after refilling the glass, flashed an apprehensive glance toward the doors. "Son, if you was a growed-up man, I'd keep my trap shut, but the editor is riled about you pistol-whipping a solicitor. Knowing Wayne Gordon, I'd advise you—"

The advice, no doubt well meant, was never completed. As the swinging doors slammed open the bartender, ducked for cover. The cowpunchers who had been listening in made a dive for the floor. A tall, beak-nosed galoot wearing store clothes and a derby hat came stalking in. At his heels trailed the hotel clerk. "That's him, Wayne, that's him!"

The newcomer relaxed when he saw Grimes, and smiled tolerantly. "The way Purdy here described you, I expected a hard-case. Now, one subscrip-

tion more or less is nothing to a flourishing paper like the *Gazette*. But your belittling remarks are another matter. Go back to the hotel, and sign up, and I'll overlook the matter."

"I ain't buying a paper writ by a skunk like you."

"You're subscribing," Wayne Gordon began, and flung out his arm in a quick, jerking gesture. "And you're reading—"

But Grimes had noted the glint of metal as a derringer slid from Gordon's cuff and into his hand, so he twisted, and slapped leather. It was hard to decide which came first, the cough of the derringer's two barrels, or the drumming blast of the Colt, fired from holster level.

The cowpunchers couldn't believe it when Gordon doubled up, and Grimes grinned through the swirling smoke.

"Belly up, gents, and drink whilst we wait for the law"

When the marshal came in, he glanced from the corpse to the gangling lad who waited behind leveled Colts. "It ain't possible. You don't look like you could pour bran outen a boot without spilling it all over yourself."

"That's what my Uncle Jason always told me. You ain't making suthin, out of this, are you, suh?"

The marshal spat and fingered his jointed white beard. Several cowpokes said, "Wayne drawed fust, jest bluffing, and this here gent poured it into him."

"That there," the marshal decided, "sort of makes it a typographical error. Wayne should've knowed better'n to bluff. But gosh-amighty, who's going to get out the next issue of the *Gazette*?"

THAT evening, Grimes carried his gear beyond the city limits and made camp. Some time after he had drunk his coffee, and spread his blankets far enough from the fire to rob snipers of a target, a man hailed the camp. Grimes answered the hail, then circled through

the darkness to catch the riders from the flank.

One was a man; the other was a dark-haired girl with an exquisite profile. Grimes popped up from behind a mesquite clump and said, "Evening, folks, light and set."

The man started violently. "Uh-um—Mr. Grimes I'm Judge Hassler; maybe you noticed my placards about town, I am running for reelection. And this is my daughter, Mona. It seems that you misunderstand our civic spirit."

"Ruther'n subscribe to that *Gazette*, I'm bedding down with the coyotes, I am plumb law-abiding."

"Oh, you shot our editor!" Mona flared up.

"M'am, supposing us folks stick to socialibility, and not discuss journalism."

Judge Hassler was a tall, white-haired man with bushy brows, shrewd eyes, and an impressive nose. "Now, Mr. Grimes, it is plain that you are a man of character, a man of spirit. We came to ask you to accept our hospitality."

Mona smiled; she had lovely teeth, and the fire glow gave richness to her smooth cheeks and throat. "A guest at our house, Father means. In that way, there'll be no question of subscribing to the *Gazette*."

The way Mona had referred to the late Wayne Gordon as "our editor" implied that the Hassler had a heavy interest in the management, or mismanagement, of the *Gazette*. Whatever their game might be, Grimes saw a chance of getting information which might prove useful to Amy Linden. A girl who baked such larruping pies deserved a good turn. But he answered, "It's right comfortable out here, ma'am."

"Oh, Simon, don't be stubborn."

"Shucks, it'd kinda embarrass me, after smoking out that loud-mouthed editor of yourn."

Judge Hassler made a magnificent gesture. "The scoundrel deceived me, he

claimed to be a gunner skilled enough to protect the freedom of the press, and here a beardless boy—er—no—of—fense—”

“You don’t shoot with your beard, jedge.”

“Come on, Simon.” Mona caught his arm. “Father has some of the grandest whiskey, and I’ll bake pop-overs for breakfast.”

Grimes raised his hat, and bowed ceremoniously. “M’am, you have talked me into suthin’. Sir, I accept your hospitality, jest to show I don’t nurse grudges.”

Between the judge’s whiskey, and Mona’s wheedling, Grimes could not decline the editorial chair of the Gazette; nor had the offer surprised him, since gun-slinging seemed more important than book-learning.

The Gazette was housed in a one-time trading post whose thick ‘dobe walls were proof against anything short of a cannon fire. Grimes sweated over his predecessor’s obituary, while on the other side of the sanctum’s wall Tio Pepe was setting up an editorial.

The old fellow finally came in and said, “*Senor*, with all respect, this writing is difficult.”

“Shucks, jest you figure it out to sound elegant, you’ve been on this job for years, you know more about it than two-three editors.”

Tio Pepe bowed. “Though you are pleased to exaggerate, *senor*, there is certain truth in what you say. But I do not read one word of English, and your scholarly hand, is too much for me. Out of your kindness, make the printed letters, then I can set up this eloquent text, accurately and with rapidity.”

Grimes set to work, and kept at it until Mona dropped in. “No dang wonder editors get all shot up, writing is hell on the hands,” he complained bitterly.

“Simon, darling,” she cooed, and planted herself on his knee, “isn’t it thrilling, shaping public opinion?”

“Way my fingers gets numb, it’s easier shaping it with a pistol.”

“Oh, you poor dear! Let me kiss it and make it well! And now look what I brought you, I knew you’d be terribly busy the first few days.”

She handed him a sheaf of foolscap, penned in a clear, beautiful hand. “Unless you insist on making changes, Tio Pepe can set this up, while you’re out hustling up news.”

GRIMES glanced at the first page, and whistled. “Gosh, honey! This here Amos Barstow must be a prime polecat; he’s sure no kind of man to run for jedge, your pappy oughta beat him easy.”

“There’s money behind him, dirty money, all the cattle thieves in the Poison Well district are backing him.”

She slid to her feet, paused at the door to smile, and say over her shoulder, “And don’t be late for supper!”

The following afternoon, having written up to the arrivals, departures, and arrests for brawling, Grimes was so tired he figured that nothing short of an apple pie and a few crullers would tide him over till supper, so he stepped from the cavernous doorway and headed down the street toward Amy’s.

When he seated himself at the counter, he felt as comfortable as if he’d landed in a clump of cholla. Amy barely acknowledged his greeting. The air was chilly and unfriendly.

“What in tunket you looking at me thataway for, honey?”

“If I could afford to lose trade, I’d serve you a lemon pie, smack in your face, you innocent-looking stinker!”

Grimes choked, sputtered coffee all over himself. “M’am, that ain’t no way to talk to friends nor customers.”

“Thank the lord I can pick my friends!” Then, seeing his bewilderment and embarrassment, she went on, “Tell me the truth, Simon, are you awfully foxy, or just a plain home-

grown fool without sense enough to come in out of the rain?"

"You sound jest like my Uncle Jason. What've I gone and done?"

She picked up the latest edition of the *Gazette*. "You couldn't ever have written this, but you can read, a little at least, and you might have known what she handed you—sit down, *shut up!* I saw that high-nosed baby-doll go tripping in, and I saw her come out looking like the cat that's skimmed off all the cream!"

"That ain't no way to talk about Mona!"

Amy threw up her hands, and said wearily, "Well, a grown man would have been just as much a fool. But look—look at this display ad, BARSTOW, THE MIRACLE MAN—EVERY COW ON HIS RANGE HAS TWINS."

"Well, ain't he a rustler?"

"The Hasslers have told you their side of it! Barstow's no saint; they don't have saints in the Poison Well country, but he's no cattle thief either! Sure, there've been disputes, and talk, like there is about anyone, but he's a solid man. My dad knew him."

Grimes face lengthened, and for a moment, he wasn't interested in pie. "Shucks, I'm a stranger, and I'm doing my work."

"Oh, no you're not, you've not begun! Tio Pepe, who can't read a word of English, could edit that paper as well as you could, and in just the way it's been edited ever since my dad passed on. You're just a better gun slick than Wayne Gordon. Barstow's got to take up that slander, and you'll smoke him out, and that'll settle the election! I wish I'd put strychnine into that pie!"

THAT night, Grimes made the rounds of the bars and honky-tonks. At the Covered Wagon, a broad-beamed blonde edged up and asked for a drink. He followed her to a booth from which he could watch the dance floor, and the keno game, and the poker tables in the



Grimes splashed the remaining drink into the girl's face.

corner. A waiter with a face like a platter of carved meat slid the glasses across the greasy table. Grimes flipped him a gold piece. The hard case pocketed the coin and turned away.

"Hey, you, where's my change?"

"Stay here and drink it out," he snarled.

His mouth sagged when he found himself looking into a gun muzzle, but he recovered quickly. "Bub, put it up, you can't get away with that stuff, it's a long way to the door."

The girl at the adjoining table cried.

"Jake, you damn' fool, that's the new editor!"

Jake dug up three silver dollars. Grimes said, "Jest a second. You're drinking with me," and slid his own glass forward.

The waiter gulped. "Ain't allowed, not on duty."

"Drink it afore I pistol whip you!"

The man drank. He grimaced, and hurried away. He barely reached the bar when he crumpled up. The blonde bounced to her feet. "Honest, I didn't know; I didn't tell him to dope you."

Grimes slapped her, end for end, and splashed the remaining drink into her face.

In another place, a bouncer cracked down, blackjacking a cowpuncher who claimed that something was wrong with the keno game. And later, on his way home, Grimes saw two waiters frisking a drunk who lay sprawled in an alley.

They were so intent on their work that they did not hear him catfooting through the gloom. He lunged, and cracked their heads together. The impact knocked them groggy. He followed up by smacking them with the barrel of his Colt. After recovering the loot, he hoisted the cowpuncher upright, and boosted him down the alley toward the *Gazette*.

The man was drunk, not doped. Presently, he sat up, owl-eyed, and blinking. "What the hell—where the hell—?"

"Here's your poke. You fell on your face, leaving the Bird' Cage."

"Suthin' hit me," the man mumbled, and rubbed his head. "I mighta knowed this hull town's a deadfall. How come you mixed in?"

"I'm a stranger myself. You jest bed down till morning, and then light a shuck."

Grimes went into the sanctum. Amy's flare-up had hit him harder than he had at first realized; her impulsive straight-forwardness impressed him. He did not know where he stood. He

was as befuddled and dazed as the groggy cowpuncher. He had to have action; and so, instead of going home, he sat down and began to write.

He was writing for Amy; each laborious stroke was to redeem himself in her eyes. He'd at least show her that he wasn't entirely a dummy, and that he did have some say of his own. Amy's opinion meant a lot to him.

He had been in many a tough place; Broken Axe was by no means the worst. What infuriated him was the contrast between the masthead slogan, IF YOU CAN'T BOOST THE TOWN WHERE YOU LIVE, LIVE IN A TOWN YOU CAN BOOST, and the place as it really was.

"Little does the Godfearin citizen of Broken Axe know what a sink of iniquity this town has become, praying on onwary cowpokes and the strangers in our mist . . ."

Then came a blow by blow account of his observations. When he finished, there was a glow in his eye. He stalked out to the Mexican quarter, and aroused Tio Pepe.

It was nearly dawn when Grimes looked at the proofs which the old man pulled. "That there," he said, "is journalism. And don't mind that cowpoke, let him sleep it off. I'm going home."

THE pounding at Grimes' door awakened him around noon. Judge Hasler, clutching a copy of the paper which Tio Pepe's clan had just distributed, looked pained. "Simon, without criticizing the literary style, the spelling is abominable. You've made the *Gazette* a laughing stock."

"Maybe it ain't like Shakespeare, but it's all fact, suh! What in tunket kind of a editor would I be if'n I didn't start off with a campaign to stimulate interest?"

The judge groaned. Mona, cool and lovely in a pink-checked house dress, came waltzing down the hall to announce breakfast; and then she said, "Simon meant well; you lay off!"

Hassler, still looking glum, stalked from the house.

As Grimes shoveled home flapjacks, Mona gently reproached him: "Darling, I'm sorry you didn't like the copy I went to so much trouble to get for you."

"Shucks, it ain't that; it's jest that I'm sorta getting heated up to the job."

"Maybe you'd better go to Dad's office, and meet some of the leading citizens, and get acquainted with Broken Axe. You really were a mite hasty."

That afternoon, he met the notables of Broken Axe: Walker, the mayor, Lem Allen, who ran the bank; the assessor, the clerk, and all the others. These were the solid citizens wearing store clothes.

"Simon," the pink-faced mayor began in the tone of a card sharp who masquerades as a deacon, "there are evils in Broken Axe, and there is no denying your accuracy. But with an election so near, such an article would—um—give muckrakers an unfair advantage. And we—all these gentlemen—certainly have the best interests of Broken Axe at heart, don't you think?"

"That's gospel," Grimes admitted. "Mebbe I went off half-cocked." He yawned, stretched out his boots, slid forward until the back of his head combined with the back of the chair and checked his sliding. "Begging your pardon, gents, but I'm powerful sleepy account of last night's misguided efforts, and . . ."

He was snoring.

The scrape of a chair aroused him. He bounced to his feet, a gun in each hand. Then, seeing that all was well, he grinned, blinked, and said, "Gents, sudden noises make me uneasy-like."

There was a general sigh of relief. Dale, the sleek and handsome assessor, had turned a dirty ash color when a pair of Colts materialized, and in precise alignment with his stomach. The others chuckled, and told each other that they had a fine editor.

Once back in his office, Grimes sat down to figure it out. While his snoring had been feigned, most of what he had heard about assessments was over his head. Uncle Jason had always considered the assessor as a legalized bandit.

"It ain't honest," he'd declare. "He loots you like a Commanche on a good year, but does he ante in when a blizzard kills what critters the dry spell didn't finish?"

And all that talk about raising so and so's assessment, and lowering so and so's, it didn't make sense. Homer Dale didn't seem to know his own mind.

The pounding of hooves, the yelling of riders, and cracking of pistols broke into his pondering. Grimes brightened, and bounded to the door to see who was shooting up the town. Things were certainly starting to happen.

Some thirty men had cleared the street, and now that Broken Axe had taken cover, the noise subsided. They were tough and dusty; nearly all had Winchesters as well as hand guns. The cavalcade swung toward the Gazette. Tio Pepe yelled, "*Senor*, bolt the door, is Barstow come for hanging you!"

Glancing through a window slot, Grimes saw the bearded man who led the riders. His outfit made a cordon; he dismounted, and came toward the door, alone.

"Let that be!" Grimes told Tio Pepe. "I'm talking to him."

Deep tan showed through the alkali dust which coated a face craggy as the far off mountains. He filled the doorway, and his power reached out ahead of him.

"I'm Amos Barstow. You're the editor?"

"Come on in, and bring your friends, suh."

Barstow's grin softened all but his eyes, "I brought them so I'd not be shot in the back afore I found you." He turned, very swiftly for his size, and drew the massive bolt of the door he had closed behind him. "Now we're

going to write an editorial, and you're going to print it whilst I watch."

He had come to shoot it out; and this was one of the few men with whom Grimes did not want to slap leather. Barstow may, in hard times, have branded too many mavericks, but that didn't make him an outright thief.

Grimes shook his head. "We ain't writing nothing, suh. When suthin is writ, I'm a-writing it."

Each sized up the other. The offer of collaboration had been only a formality.

"Reach—any time you're ready," Barstow invited, softly.

"Visitor's choice, suh."

THE draw was quick, yet far from fast enough. Grimes had his gun leveled before Barstow's weapon could half-clear leather, and for once, he risked holding his fire. "Let it be!"

The gun settled back. Barstow knew the difference between valor and suicide, and was man enough not to be ashamed.

"Bub, I can understand a kid being quicker'n I am, only I can't understand why you didn't unravel some cart-ridges."

"There's things I can't savvy either, suh."

"Such as the difference between stealing for yourself, and being paid to steal for someone else?"

Without waiting for an answer, Amos Barstow opened the door, and went out to join his men. They rode away without shooting.

That night, instead of sitting up and lallygagging with Mona, Grimes said he had a headache, and that he'd turn in early. The judge was going to play poker, which was what gave Grimes his cue.

Once the house was dark and quiet, he got up and tiptoed to the judge's study. After drawing the shades, he lit a candle and began his search of the big walnut secretary, and the roll top desk.

While Grimes knew nothing about

bookkeeping, it was plain that the *Gazette* was taking in a lot of money. The joker seemed to be the city license, the rent, and taxes, and operating expenses.

Grimes reasoned, "If'n the dang thing jest barely pays the interest on the notes, it ain't worth nothing, so how in tunket can that lilac-hair-tonic smelling Homer Dale figure it'd oughta be taxed plumb into the ground?"

The sound of buggy wheels in the drive checked the investigation. He headed for the vestibule, and squatted behind the tall hat rack. Mona and some man stood at the door.

A rustle of silks . . . a sigh . . . a kiss followed by a gasp.

"Homer—don't—"

So the assessor was on the job, collecting his toll? Dale protested, "You're standing me off because of that jughead who carries his brains in his trigger finger!"

"I simply have to put up with him."

"But you don't need to sit on the porch every evening, billing and cooing!"

"Wait till after election! Good-night, darling."

Breathless, Mona hurried through the vestibule, and went up the stairs. Grimes, slipping from cover, overtook Dale at the buggy. He jabbed a .45 to the small of the assessor's back.

"Let's you and me take a drive, Homer, and don't holler."

Dale, too scared to object, obeyed orders. Some minutes later, Grimes was following him into the assessor's office. "Bring out them tax rolls."

"Wh-what for?"

"Jest checking up on what the *Gazette* gets milked for."

The figures jibed with those in the judge's books; and like the *Gazette*, every business in Broken Axe paid fantastic taxes.

"Mister, this here is re-markable as each of Barstow's cow critter's having twins twict a year. What is the hold out?"

"You scoundrel, I'll have you jailed! I'll—I'll—"

"Your sorrowing kinfolk'll swear out a warrant for me! Where's the private tax books?"

"What—what's that?"

"Can't no one stay in business at them rates, but they all keep going, some making bare vittles, some of 'em buying their womenfolks silk dresses and fancy furniture. I mean some ain't paying what's on these public books. Where's books showing what's really paid—by the folks that vote right. Show me, or I'm blowing your shirt buttons through your gizzard."

Dale found some more books. After glancing at a few pages, Grimes ordered him to load them into the buggy. That done, captor and captive went to the *Gazette's* fortress.

The door was high and wide. As Grimes opened it, he commanded, "Lead that hoss and buggy in, there's plenty room."

After tying Dale to a chair, Grimes set to work. With little to do but watch Tio Pepe, he had learned how to set type, and in view of the difficulty of writing, Grimes decided to skip that step. He removed a column of Tio Pepe's work, and began setting up the expose.

WHILE the result was a compositor's nightmare, the general idea was clearly presented: one set of books to convince the chumps that everyone was taxed alike, and then a working set, which favored the politicians. Though he was unable to go into the accounting methods which gave the scheme its false-front of legality, the mere existence of two sets of records clinched the case.

He pulled half a dozen proofs, the weirdest printing job in the *Gazette's* entire history, but Grimes was proud of it. After tearing from the records the page which included the tax bill charged against the *Gazette*, and then the one showing what the city actually collected, he paused to warn Dale, "I'm coming

right back, and if you even look like you tried to get away, I'll bust your head."

It would soon be dawn. Maybe Amy was up already. With his handful of trophies, he dashed to the back door of the restaurant.

"Lemme in, I got to show you suthin!"

"Go peddle your papers!"

"Woman, you listen to me," he rattled the door. "You listen."

"Oh, all right!"

A match scratched. Amy, barefooted and pulling together the edges of her kimono opened the door, and stood there, blinking in the lamplight.

"Only reason I let you in was that Amos Barstow left on his own two feet. Like everyone else, I'm still wondering why one of you didn't smoke the other one out."

"'Low he figured I was too dumb to be responsible."

"That might explain why he didn't pull down on you, but not why you didn't smoke him out."

"Look at this, listen to this, read this—"

It did not take her long to catch the point.

"I bet every other expense is padded just as heavily. Gosh, this edition of the *Gazette* will blow things wide open—Simon—" She dropped the papers, and reached with both arms, and tiptoed to kiss him. "I still don't know whether you're foxy or whether you fell into something."

"Neither do I, and my stomach thinks my throat's been cut."

She hustled him to the door, "Run along, I'll make some coffee and flap-jacks as soon as I can get dressed." Then, reaching into a closet, "Here's dad's Winchester and a box of shells, there'll be trouble aplenty when that edition gets around town!"

Back in the office, Grimes eyed his prisoner, then planted himself in the swivel chair, and leaned back to catnap until Amy brought breakfast.

(Continued on page 128)

Death Comes to Terror Town

By MICHAEL OBLINGER

A HOLY terror this town. It had boomed and banged its way from adolescence to full grown maturity in less than a year. It had risen from a clutter of tents and shacks to a gun-toting, glittering metropolis of two thousand inhabitants, most of whom had memories better forgotten and pasts that wouldn't bear the light.

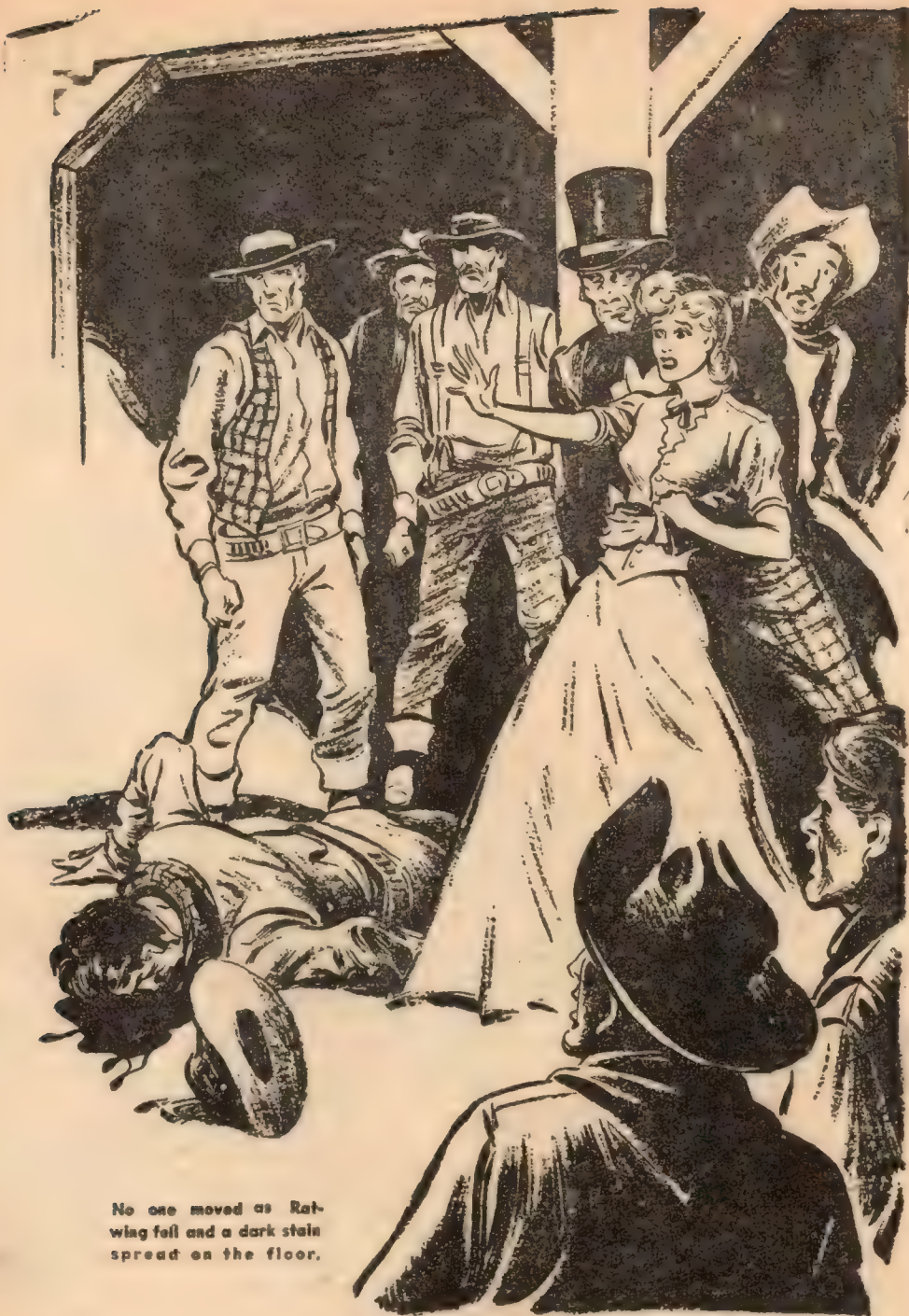
The terror that lurked there touched the lives of every one in the town or out of it. Its black influence had spread wide across free-range country on the north, mining districts on the west, and to the new farm settlements on the east and south.

Right now it was touching the life of young Bill Dugan on the boardwalk in front of the town's spraddling new hotel, the Lodestone House. Terror touched Bill in the person of one Jake Ratwing, a constable hungering for more and bigger chips.

Illustrated by
Frank Volp



"Don't trust any girl farther than you can twirl your lasso." The dance hall cutie had warned young Bill Dugan, and when he finally caught up with Arnette Shire, he learned how true it was!



No one moved as Ratwing fell and a dark stain spread on the floor.

Ratwing's dark face swam toward Bill through the smoke and fumes issuing from the open door of the Lodestone saloon. He had cracked lips, bunching eyebrows and a sneer.

"You're outta bounds, wrangler," he said. "Word has got around you're from Chiphorn. The boss says to tip you off to light out quick. There's a ordinance against Chiphorn beef an' Chiphorn

critters. An' the term critters applies to saddle-busters, strays an' mavericks ever' kind." The constable yanked out his watch and scowled at its sun-splashed dial. "Six o'clock now. We'll give yuh till eight."

Bill didn't even look at Jake. He stood with back toward the hot, dusty main street which wound drunkenly south through a maze of honkey-tonks, chuck-houses, stores and saloons, and twitched one shoulder as if to remove some pestering fly.

"If you got a shirt that clings to your sweat," he suggested mildly, "take it off. I'm not moving a step which way or 'tother till the sun cools off."

Ratwing growled as he glanced at the hard young face. It had a jawline long enough to matter, a chin that came jutting out, and eyes that held glints of humor, intelligence and stubbornness.

"Two hours!" the constable said bluntly. "Then you git!"

Suddenly Bill gave him both word-barrels simultaneously. The gist of it was that if Jim Silver, the new mayor, had any chores to do, he could damn well do 'em like a man himself and not send in his place a half-stewed underling. Furthermore, that boycott by local merchants on Chiphorn beef was a dirty slap at honest folks' pocketbooks, and if Silver thought he could also block the main trail through the town to the eastern markets at steel-end, sixty miles south, he was picking himself for a deluded fool.

Bill stopped short, then added, "Go and repeat to Silver everything I've told you, you skunk. 'Specially that part about him doing his own chores."

RATWING stared and nodded. "You coulda saved your skin if you'd listened to me," he said. "Now you can't. I'll tell Silver." He turned away. "Where yuh want the remains sent, Mister Dugan?"

"Straight to hell if you can get 'em there!" Bill flung at him.

He strode past the open door to the

main entrance of Lodestone House and made his way back to the crowded dining room and found a seat in a corner.

He picked up a fork and speared a slice of bread, wishing it were Silver's black heart. He crumbled up some of the bread and stuck it in his mouth. His gaze leaped to a long table where six girls were being seated and he recognized them as Terry Tuck's entertainers, imported at great cost from far off St. Louie, to come and dazzle the crowd at Tuck's opening night tonight. It was the gayest, brightest conglomeration of talent, the posters said, ever assembled in one spot.

Bill was shy of those girls. Though he liked their looks all right, he had got half-scared at breakfast when they had all but sat in his lap in a giggling effort to attract his attention.

One of them, a little toughie with bold eyes and long yellow curls, was now covertly watching him. He had heard her name—Norma Hale.

She stared straight at Bill. "Who's that big raw rancher over there," she began, "with the hay in his haircut?"

Bill listened to the roar of laughter, his cheeks burning.

Norma taunted him some more, "They should have put a ring in its nose before they led that bull in here. After all, this isn't a stable."

As the second burst of laughter subsided, Bill decided it was about time to put that heifer in the branding-pen and scorch her hide. But just then a waiter touched him on the shoulder and whispered close to his ear, "Mr. Silver jist sent word for you to meet him right away to talk things over. He's waiting in the lobby outside."

"Let him wait!" Bill snarled. "Nobody around here's important enough to take me away from my chuck. I'll talk to him after that."

The waiter, an old man with graying skin that almost matched his gray hair, looked dubiously at Bill. "Mebbe yuh didn't understand me. It's Mr. Silver, the mayor."

"So what?"

"It's his honor, the—"

"Tell him to wait or go to hell!" Bill snapped. "An' for Judas' sake, slip over an' caution that she-lynx wearing the yellow curls that a couple more cracks and I'll put a check-bit and blinders on her."

The waiter took one look at Bill's smouldering face and recoiled.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Dugan."

He was such an old man and so obviously scared, that Bill relented and slipped him a dollar bill. "Rush my order, grandpaw," he said, "and I won't keep anybody waiting."

THROUGHOUT Bill had spoken loud enough to be heard in a room that had sensed trouble coming and was quietly recording every word, move and gesture. It watched the waiter hurry back to the kitchen to place Bill's order, saw him return and shuffle along as fast as he could to enter the lobby with Bill's message, then reappear, white and fearful, followed by an over-dressed, chunky man, in whose cheeks two red spots flamed.

The chunky man, Mayor Silver, elbowed the waiter aside, then started directly for Bill Dugan's table. In the dead silence his heavy boots clanked.

Bill glanced up casually, grinned owlishly, and greeted Silver, "'Fore you cut into a herd like this, you ought to tighten your saddle cinches. You might get trampled underfoot."

Silver's voice was choked. "Damn yor insolence! Listen, Dugan, I've took all I'm going to take. We have an ordinance and I propose to enforce it. When you leave this dining-room, you'll mount yor hoss an' get outta town. If yuh don't—"

"Well?"

"Jist remember I warned yuh, you blasted headstrong—"

Bill kicked the chair next to him out from the table, flashed one long arm upward and yanked Silver down onto its seat with a banging thud.

"Until I've had my say," he said huskily, "nothing's going to happen. Will you listen humanlike or do I got to ram it home same as a gun-wad in a muzzle-loader?"

Silver blinked twice, then dropped a hand toward his hip. Bill rapped the knuckles sharply with his fork. He was leaning close to the mayor, their faces almost touching. The mayor eyed him intently and suspiciously.

"Whoa!" he said. "Careful! Save the fireworks till later. You might burn someone."

Silver raised both hands doggedly and placed them on the table. Bill relaxed in his chair.

"That's better," he said. "Now let's talk. I didn't come here special to break that damn ordinance, which is a disgrace to the town, or to make any threats or monkeyshines. I got business. The business concerns the sister of my foreman, Hap Shire, a girl who was dazzled here by promises of a good job in the bank, then passed along to some dancehall feller so she could kick right smart in a chorus line. Her name is Arnette. Arnette Shire. I've come to take her home to her brother an' her family even if I got to blow what passes for brains outta every one of your constables and the chief himself, your side-kick, Blackie Lewis."

Silver had somewhat regained his composure. He leaned back, thrust two fingers in a pocket of his fancy vest and fetched out a long black stogy, which he clipped between his teeth. Then, frowning, he spat the clipped-off end into Bill's plate either intentionally or accidentally.

Bill shoved the plate in front of the mayor. "Keep your dirty ash-tray," he said.

Silver lit his cigar and blew the smoke toward Bill. "Why didn't yuh come to me in the first place?" he demanded sourly. "I don't know this Arnette Shire. But if she's in town I coulda located her for you mighty quick. An' you would have a permit to show my constables

while you was here. Then nobody would molest you."

Bill chuckled dryly. "Permit—holy cow! Now ain't that cute? But what would a permit cost me?"

"Only fifty bucks."

"Why, you damned thief!"

Silver made as if to grab for his gun again, then decided against it. There was steel in Bill's stare. There was challenge. Along Bill's stony cheeks the muscles were drawn tight over the high cheekbones.

THE madder he got, the softer his voice. "I can't figger why you got it in for us, Silver. Your tax of ten dollars a head on every critter we drive to market through this town would ruin us. You've taken advantage of the fact that this town sits at the head of Chip-horn Valley and there isn't any other trail out. All the ranchers in Chiphorn, twenty of us, you've boycotted because we won't knuckle in to you. We can't come here, trade here without breaking an ordinance."

Silver grinned. "Ten dollars a head for righthaw ain't too much considerin' all the nuisance an' noise an' confusion yor critters would make passin' through the main part o' town."

"We could go through the edge of town."

Silver threw up his hands in horror. "Even worse. That's high-class residence property."

"With low-class sneak-joints and chip-pies and all the rest," Bill countered heavily. "The dirt and confusion our cattle would make wouldn't amount to anything compared to what you'll find there now. No, Silver, we won't pay that ten bucks tax. It's extortion."

"Very well," Silver answered calmly, "then you folks kin starve. We'll fight any efforts you make to break the boycott. We have a armed posse you won't get through, I'll promise yuh."

"We'll get through or burn every building over your damned head."

That amused Silver. His jowls split

in a wide-stretched grin. "Yor gettin' way off the track, ain't yuh, Dugan? Yor business, you said, was not to break the ordinance but to find a girl. Let's stick to the point."

Bill's eyes glittered. "All right. I'll go a piece with you just to find out how good your word is, and not because you've forced my hand." He flicked a not-too-thick stack of bills from his pocket and thumbled off five tens. "Here's your fifty, Silver. Now gimme that permit."

Silver did. He made a flourish writing it. He chewed his cigar and glanced over at Tuck's entertainers and winked, courting approval. Then he fixed his tie, drawing attention to the diamond pin.

"I'm glad yuh come to yor senses," he drawled. "Now this—yer, Arnette Shire—we'll get busy an' try to locate her. Yuh better pitch in, too."

"Don't worry, I will."

SILVER became more expansive. "I'll even offer yuh a tip. Most ever'body in town is goin' to Tuck's opening to-night. Chances are you'll see her there."

"And your men won't bother me?"

"Cripes sake, no. Ain't yuh got the permit? It's like I give you a bond."

Bill nodded. "Sure, the mayor's bond. It better be good."

Silver rose. There was an expression in his eyes of stealth and cunning—the look of a puma stalking sheep. Bill made a mental note of it and decided wisely to be on guard. . . .

Later, waiting near the fringe of the crowd storming into Terry Tuck's new dance hall, it had to be Bill's luck to have Norma Hale spot him and sidle over.

"My good gosh, if it isn't young Hereford all decked out in the undertaker's shirt!"

"Beat it!" Bill said. He couldn't bother with her now.

"Gur-ruls, come here!" she squealed. "We're taking the bull to the banquet."

Bill turned her around and pushed

her firmly back into the moving line. "Scat!"

Norma didn't seem to mind. She turned her head and smiled a white toothy smile and coquettishly shrugged one bare shoulder.

"You going to dance with me, Mr. Hereford?"

"Dunno, I might."

She lowered her voice. "I overheard you talking to the mayor. Who is this Arnette Shire?"

"Girl."

"How unusual!" Norma giggled. "You don't say! Girl! But tall or tiny, thin or fat?—maybe I could help you."

"You mean it?"

"Yes, Bull."

"The name's Bill," he remonstrated, tired of her jibes. "Anyway, I can't see how you could be much help to me. You're from St. Louie. Stranger. Me—I've raked the town. No clews. I'm beginning to think there's something funny about this."

"Maybe there is." To his surprise, Norma reached back impulsively and took his hand. "Listen," she said, suddenly serious, "a girl has ways of finding out things a man hasn't. So don't underrate me."

Bill didn't answer her. He just followed along behind, puzzled, cautious, resolved not to take any false steps until he was sure of his ground. One thing he didn't understand was why Norma was entering the hall with the crowd instead of using Tuck's private entrance. And why, especially, had she singled him out for attention tonight? There were scores of other men around with bigger bank-rolls, finer clothes and better looks.

She asked again, "You'll dance with me, Bull?"

"Why pick me? You want your feet trampled on?"

She reached back and took his hand again. "You big bruiser, you!" She squeezed his fingers. "Maybe I like you. Maybe I'm tired of boiled shirts and gold collar-studs and all the pawing and pinching we entertainers get."

She paused and continued in a lower voice, "And maybe, Bull, I'm tired of fighting off kisses, and worse. I try to go straight, but let me tell you, brother, we're in a crooked game with all the odds turned against us and the devil keeping score."

"I'll be damned!" Bill said.

THEY had entered the hall among colored lights and streamers and bright new furnishings. Floors had been stained and waxed to resemble glistening ice. There was a game-room, dining hall and a huge raised platform where the orchestra sat and special entertainers like Norma came out to sing or dance. There were alcoves tucked away in the walls each of which contained a miniature bar with a uniformed bartender and the usual bevy of helpers, all pretty girls, to serve those sitting at tables. Also there was a roped-off space for the town's most prominent citizens and here, banked with bunting and decked with flowers, was the mayor's special table.

"Just like he was a king," Bill jeered. "I'll bet he's got his fingers curled in Tuck's money-box, too."

"Shouldn't wonder," Norma said, turning away. "After my act, what about sharing some of your pizen? I might need some."

"Sure," Bill said.

On impulse, she came back. "Look, you overgrown maverick, one thing I haven't quite straightened out yet. You got a crush on that stray, Arnette, or is it just brotherly affection?"

Bill's eyes frosted over. "Who wants to know?" he snapped.

"I do."

"Why?"

"Because," Norma said, "I make my business making other people's business important to me. I'm not trying to stable you myself, Bull, or stake out a spread on your prairie—so don't get ideas. I'm just curious. Girl-curious. And I am a girl—remember?"

Bill caught himself studying her curving lines. "I couldn't forget," he said.

"Well, what's the verdict?"

"All hell couldn't get that out of me," Bill told her. "I figure there are some things too personal to talk about."

Norma laughed. Her eyes were wicked with unconcealed delight in the clever way she'd trapped him. Too late, Bill realized he should have put a muffler on his mouth. And he was damned disgusted standing here and being made a fool of like this.

As she left, Norma gave him one parting little stab. "I'm glad she bucked your saddle off, Bull. Maybe that will teach you to wake up to yourself. Don't trust any girl farther than you can twirl your lasso. That's my advice."

"What about you?" Bill blurted after her.

She turned her head and made a face at him. . . .

Bill wandered around, drank a few drinks, waltzed with one of the entertainers, then stood with his back to pillar as Norma Hale suddenly glided out on the raised platform in tight-fitting briefs and went through her act, a song and dance number. Her daring and beauty brought her furious rounds of applause and a mad ovation from stamping, cheering males.

THE sight of all those pasty-faced local swains trampling each other to be first to dance with her so disgusted Bill that he turned his back and stomped into the game room. Players and spectators ram-jammed all the space around the roulette wheels and poker tables. A husky miner stepped on Bill's foot, blew his stinking breath in Bill's face and growled, "Outta the way, yuh clumsy slab! Watch where you're goin'."

Bill knocked him down. The miner seemed to have gone to sleep so Bill left him there and reentered the main hall. There was quiet in the hall, a respectful quiet, and someone said it was because the mayor was entering with his party.

"Please, Bull, I want a word with you," a familiar voice said. He turned and there was Norma. Her eyes were

almost staring out of her head. Her curls had been tossed every which way coming through the crush. She was biting her lips. "I—I want to ask you a favor. Will you promise?"

"That depends."

"One little favor. All I'll ever ask. Please, Bull," she begged.

"What is it?"

"You're due for a shock," Norma said. "But no matter what you see, what you hear, don't make a move. It's your life, Bull. It's your only chance to get out of here in one piece."

Bill was faintly amused. "So?" he said mockingly. "I got the mayor's bond. His honor said I could trust him. I have the paper with his name signed in ink."

The crowd swept forward to get a view of Mayor Silver and his party and Bill and Norma were jostled and pushed. But Norma held back. She took Bill's arm and clung to it.

"For the last time, Bull, for God's sake, do as I tell you."

She was standing on tiptoes, pleading with him. He saw a tear start and glisten, saw her lips pucker like a kid's. She was very appealing, suddenly very real. All girl, and tender, behind that bold, brash front. Blood pumped in Bill's throat and he stooped until his lips lightly brushed her forehead.

"Okay, babe. Maybe I ought to call you heifer instead. You're all right. But what the hell are you trying to tell me?"

A lane had been opened through the crowd. Town constables went ahead to maintain that passageway, force the spectators back.

Bill swung around. For one awful moment he knew he was seeing things—knew he couldn't be right. It was the effect of liquor, the deception of the lights. It was a brutal, dirty lie! No, by God, the lovely dressed girl clinging to Jim Silver's arm and smiling up into his greedy, triumphant face, was Arnette Shire!

Norma tried to stop Bill but he flung her off. He struck into the lane, kicked the legs from under two constables,

mashed the face of one of Tuck's bouncers leaping toward him. Unopposed now, he had a straight, narrow track down through the massed spectators to where Silver and Arnette stood, hands clasped, watching him.

Arnette shrieked, "Bill, be good! Behave yourself, Bill!"

Bill walked on toward them, eyes burning hate. Hate and fury came out of a hell of realization, of understanding. Nothing could stop him—nothing. No one could prevent him from getting his hands on Silver and sinking his thumbs into that fat, greasy neck.

His voice rattled along the passageway, "I'm taking you, Silver! I'm taking you!"

A FIGURE that Bill recognized as Blackie Lewis, Lodestone's chief-of-police, slid to a position at his partner's side. Slightly behind Lewis, crouched Constable Ratwing, using his chief for a blind. He had both guns drawn. Obviously he was trying to sink sights on Bill without being noticed himself. He made an awkward try getting out from his blind far enough to risk a shot. He was ready with the business, two fingers curling on the cold steel tongues within the trigger-guards, when Bill blazed from his holster and brought him down.

Bill watched the wriggle and writhe of muscles on Ratwing's back and a dark stain spreading on the floor. The floor looked like ice, the faces of the crowd looked frozen. Except for Bill, no one moved. Bill still moved, bridging the gap between him and Silver.

He said, "You can't make a gunshark out of a toad like Ratwing. All he could do was croak."

The gap thinned. Blackie Lewis, who had triggered a spot of honor for himself as the town's slickest gunman, had never seen Bill in action before. So he wasn't taking chances. Not any wild ones. The chance he would take must be planned and timed. Ready for the first slip of a cocky youngster too sure

of himself. When he thought he detected the provocative error—Bill swinging both arms back in momentum with his step—Blackie's hands raced.

He stretched out his neck, blind-shocked, twisted sideways and seemed to bow to the crowd before he flattened on the floor.

Arnette screamed, lurching against Silver. Silver grabbed her and brought her around in front of him as a shield. Abruptly behind Bill one of the constables he had knocked down fired from a sprawled position and got Bill in the back, smashing the left shoulder-blade. Through smoke smear and the blink of lights Bill saw the surging-in crowd close the passageway. He heard an exultant roar. He staggered to keep his feet, lunged toward a pillar, collided with someone, then felt himself being caught in a smash of bodies that bore him along, bumping, straining, cursing, away from Silver and Arnette.

At a moment when he had had both of them powerless and cringing before him, fate had snatched the double-prize away. The terror that had ruled terror town still ruled. Death and intrigue and violence—grasping hate, contempt for the law, it was as it had been, would always be unchanged. Boycotts, penalties, ordinances, the slick, sly fingers of a devil-despot in every pie. On every side his harpies, men and women who had sold their souls to hell.

Bill thought, "The only decent one here is Norma. Only her."

In the milling, the surge and sway of all those massed bodies, he was safe enough. But to Bill now what consolation in that? What advantage? He couldn't break the boycott, save a wayward girl or relieve the hunger and despair of honest Chiphorn folks imprisoned in a valley above the town.

BATTERED, bloody, Bill was swept this way, that way, so hard pressed that he couldn't get his good arm above his chest. Colored lights and fancy trimmings . . . the big hall roaring in a hu-

man stampede . . . up on the platform where the orchestra was, the banging and rattling of tin horns and the booming of the big drum. On top of the piano Terry Tuck himself, master of ceremonies, was kicking at the clutching hands of others wanting to climb to safety beside him.

Bill caught a glimpse of wild streaming hair and torn dress of a dance hall girl. He heard screeches and crashing bottles. Splintering glass. Tables crushing to the floor. A general bedlam spread over the place.

Abruptly right behind him was a wall and one of those cute little drinking-stalls. He waded through bodies, climbed up over the bar and found a door.

The door led into a hall.

The hall—Bill put a hand to his head, wonderingly, and gasped, "That you, Norma?"

Norma ran to him. "Bull—thank God! I can get you out. I can save you. Quick, Bull, come with me!"

Bill stood stubbornly and shook his head. "I won't go, Norma. I won't give up. I can get Silver yet if I can find somewhere to hole in for a spell."

"You're such a damn fool," Norma said. "Please, Bull—your life. Worth more than anyone's out there."

"I won't kill Arnette if that's what you're scared of. I've got all over that. Only Silver."

"Not even Silver," Norma said.

With his good arm Bill tried to push her aside. "You don't understand," he said. "When and if I get Silver, the boycott's broken. Down in the valley where I come from folks can live and run their stock and not be shut up like rats."

"Is that the way it is?"

"That's the way it is."

"But someone might take Silver's place."

"The hell he will! No one would have the guts."

Norma surrendered. She raised on tiptoes and kissed Bill's lips. "I'll hide

you in the girls' dressing-room," she said. . . .

Within an hour order was restored in Terry Tuck's dance hall. Faintly from the dressing-room, Bill heard the jumbled sounds of music and dancing, cheering and yells.

He got out quietly, made his way to the raised platform before anyone noticed him. Then in a squawk of horns and a crash of cymbals the orchestra stopped.

Forty feet away in the roped-off space, and near the very special table reserved for the guest of honor, a chunky man reared up, flabby cheeks smeared as with chalk, and shouted:

"Get him! Get him! It's that Chip-horn killer!"

A bullet tore through Silver's chest and he fell with his head on a young lady's lap, Arnette's lap, then rolled and flopped near the table.

Bill raised his gun-arm as a signal to the crowd. "No one moves," he said. "It's all over. No more killings. No more guns. Soon as I leave here, you can clean up the mess, dance and drink your liquor for all o' me." He stared straight at Arnette. "I'm taking you back to Hap and your paw and maw, Arnette. I ought to spank you right here in public but I won't. Are you coming?"

Arnette rose, white-lipped, swaying. "I've had enough, Bill."

Bill dripped blood on the floor. In the awful quiet light steps came to him and there was a certain perfume and a certain pressure on his arm. From the tail of an eye he had a sight of a bold face—bold and possessive. Somehow all of what he saw reassured him, made things come right.

"You're going, Bull," Norma choked.

"Good luck, goodbye, you overgrown Hereford."

Bill half turned to grin at her. "Soon as we can push our critters to market, Norma, I'll come back. There's a swell little heifer in Terry Tuck's herd and I'm going to cut her out."

SQUATTERS WELCOME!

(Continued from page 83)

ranchhouse," said Evans as he raised his lanky body and stretched. "That's right, boys, keep yore irons clean. Anything could happen. But ony Buck an' me are crossin' the creek an' shaggin over to the Anchor."

Buck emitted an abused bellow.

"Whadda mean, boss, shaggin'? Yuh figger we ain't ridin' up to the Anchor? Ain't we takin' the hosses?"

"Nope," said Evans. "We're a pair o' weary pilgrims what's lookin' for a feed. They ain't none o' them new gunnies of Dearborn's knows either of us by sight. We're walkin right into Dearborn's bedroom before breakfast."

"An' me with all the hide rubbed off my feet," complained Buck.

"Which is better than lead in yore gizzard if yuh was ridin'," said Evans cheerfully.

"We're runnin' head-on into a ruckus we can never walk out of," growled Buck. "I know a bunch of them outside gunnies don't think much of two hombres wearin' out their bootheels, and neither do I."

"Leastwise," said Evans, "they come out, have a look, and let us walk smack into the big ranchhouse. By the time they get smart as to what is happening, Buff Dearborn will be pleadin' for his life even if I have to take him one ear and one arm at a time."

It was remarkable that so many hired gunnies should not have been alarmed at two men afoot, who went strolling up to the ranchhouse. Evans knew that if they had been mounted, they would have been stopped. As it was, unless they ran smack into someone who knew them, they were just another pair of trail bums.

Buff Dearborn pulled his fat figure to the side of the bed, his face pale against his flashy pajamas. He was

looking straight into the round little hole of a .45 in the hands of Evans.

"What's this! What's this!" he sputtered.

"We're wantin' for you to send for Sally Ritter and have her brought here unharmed, unless you want yourself with broken legs and broken arms and a bullet in your backbone."

"But I can't, I won't!" Dearborn sputtered.

Evans saw his eyes leap past him to the doorway. At the same minute, he heard Buck Lansing rap out, "Freeze, you snake."

Buck didn't wait for Digger Jones to freeze. Digger had a gun halfway from the leather. Buck rapped him hard across the forehead with the barrel of his .45.

"Now, Dearborn, get into your duds," Evans ordered. "You're walkin' out with Buck and me. You're takin' us to Sally Ritter."

The hired gunnies of Buff Dearborn were treated to the unusual scene of their big red-faced boss, walking in front of Van Evans, with a leveled gun in his hand. The gunnies seemed to think they should do something about it.

Evans's voice cracked out, "If you gunswifts want to draw your pay, you'll stay out of this. I'm takin' your boss, one arm and one leg at a time, if any hombre make a move."

One gunny evidently didn't believe the red-headed owner of the Potlatch. He made a quick movement toward his iron. Evans's .45 roared. The bullet nipped off the lobe of Buff Dearborn's left ear.

"And that's just a sample," said Evans. "Buck, keep an eye on them. Dearborn, you got but one way to save your life. We're not goin' after Sally

Ritter. You're sendin' your men and havin' the girl brought here unharmed. In the meantime, just take it easy."

EVANS had backed into one corner of the porch. He had the big, plaid-shirted rancher between him and his hired gunnies. He had his gun prodding into the spine of Dearborn. Blood was running freely down Dearborn's neck where his ear had been clipped.

"You can give the order now, Dearborn, or you can wait till you get yourself a couple of broken legs, and after that, you won't be worth much."

Digger Jones came roaring out of the house. He had a gun up and snapped a shot at Buck Lansing before Buck could drawn iron. Two seconds later, Digger Jones lay on the porch with a hole squarely in the middle of his forehead.

"For God's sake, Evans," pleaded Dearborn, "you wouldn't shoot a man down in cold blood?"

"I would shoot you down in cold blood," stated Evans, with a steel edge to his voice. "And that's just what will happen to you, in the next five minutes, if you don't send men with the right orders to bring the girl here."

There was no way any of the gunnies could get in a shot at Evans, without shooting through the big body of Dearborn.

"Do like he says," quavered Dearborn. "Bring the girl up from the Lang shack, but Evans, I'm going to settle with you for this later."

Evans grinned. "Later," he said, "will be very much too late."

There in the chill dawn, more than twenty gun-swifts were held helpless, unless they wanted their boss salivated, and it was easy to see what they were thinking. Upon Dearborn depended what pay they were to get.

PERHAPS ten minutes passed. Evans didn't move, nor did he take the muzzle of his .45 away from Dearborn's spine. Perhaps never before had a full

score of tough gunnies been more effectively bluffed. Only, with Evans, it was not a bluff. He would have killed Dearborn as quickly as any other varmint afflicting the country.

He was worried now over what might have happened to Sally Ritter. Then he saw the girl coming on a led horse between two men. She sat erect and defiant. And he knew then that she was all right.

"Bring her over here," Evans ordered.

Dearborn at last mustered a bit of guts. "You got away with it so far, Evans," he stated, "but you ain't got the girl off the Anchor yet."

Evans spoke quietly. "I don't intend to get the girl off the Anchor personally. I'm goin' to have plenty of help. If you don't believe it, have a looksee down the trail?"

Evans could hear Dearborn's gasp of amazement. Five men came riding up the trail. One was Sheriff Roper from Paint Rock. Three others were his toughest deputies. A slight, gray-haired man rode with them.

Evans's voice cracked out, "Now you owlhoot gun-swifts, if you're smart, you'll be lightin' a shuck out o' here and out o' this country as fast as your nags can hightail. Sheriff Roper's probably got a reward notice for damn' near every one o' yuh."

Dearborn blustered, "Sheriff Roper won't stand for this. Buck Lansing just murdered Digger Jones and you've been torturin' me. You'll be the one who is taken to Paint Rock, Evans."

Evans laughed harshly. "Don't know if'n Sheriff Roper is takin' anybody anywhere. The little man in the gray suit, is the feller you'd best keep an eye on."

At that moment, the horse bearing Sally Ritter came up. The girl's hands were still tied behind her.

"If'n you don't cut those ropes off that gal, Sheriff Roper will put you in jail and throw away the key," snapped Evans.

Dearborn could see that. He hastily gave an order to untie the girl quickly and to get away from her. She came right straight to the porch, when her hands had been untied. Evans was still holding Dearborn in a protective corner. She was a little pale, but there was a light in her eyes, when she looked at Evans, that sent that same old cold chill down his spine.

"Thanks, Van," she said simply.

"You been hurt, Sally?" demanded Evans.

"No, Van, except for my wrists being rubbed where they tied my hands."

"Stay where you are, Sally," ordered Evans. "Don't come too close to the porch."

The Sheriff Roper party had been riding in pairs. They suddenly fanned out. There was swift movement among the newly hired gun-swifts of the Anchor. They were making a wild break for their horses. Here was something they wanted nothing of.

As graying Sheriff Roper rode up, Dearborn sputtered, "Lookit, sheriff, these two killer walked into my house this morning. Look at Digger Jones! Buck Lansing killed him! Look at me! Evans shot my ear off!"

"You're damn' lucky I didn't shoot your head off," drawled Evans. "The next time, if there is a next time, you try kidnapping one of my friends you'll be lying horizontal when the sheriff arrives."

Practically all of the Anchor riders were getting the saddles on their horses, mounting and getting away.

Dearborn still blustered, "I charge Buck Lansing with murder and Van Evans with torture!"

Sheriff Roper was an angular man with a bony face. His voice sounded as if it came from some bullfrog, in a swamp. "Now I reckon that's too danged bad," said Sheriff Roper. "Makes it kind of tough seein' you being taken out of my jurisdiction. Meet United States Marshal Crump, Dearborn. He has

papers to serve on you. I was brung along jest to make sure you went to Paint Rock without no trouble."

Evans could hear Dearborn gasp.

"United States Marshal?" questioned Dearborn. "What papers?"

"Well," said the little man quietly, "you are charged with damming and obstructing a navigable stream."

"What? Topanga Creek?" roared Dearborn. "I only touched it on my property."

The little gray man said patiently, "A navigable stream, Mr. Dearborn, is government property no matter where it flows. Small steamers plying between settlements on the lower Topanga River have been forced to lie up for a couple of days. The water has slacked out from under them. Mr. Evans supplied the answer. I am afraid you are under arrest, Mr. Dearborn. I am also afraid you are subject to a minimum fine of ten thousand dollars, and a minimum sentence of two years in jail."

EVANS and Buck Lansing procured horses for Sally Ritter and themselves from the Anchor ranch, to ride back.

"For the love of lizards," exploded Buck. "Whatever gave you that danged cool idea?"

"You did," said Evans.

"Me?"

"Yeah. When you said as how small boats and flat boats run up this Topanga River forty years ago, I got me an idea. Wherever a stream has been navigated, unless by special law, it remains navigable and government property."

Dearborn, flanked by Sheriff Roper and United States Marshall Crump, looked most unhappy. Evans, Sally Ritter, and Buck Lansing spurred their horses into the ford below the camp.

A wild yi-yippee went up from the Potlatch boys when they saw Sally Ritter riding between Evans and Buck

Lansing. Their guns blasted and blasted again in the air.

Evans looked into the sparkling, smiling eyes of Sally. He looked over at the half-finished cabin that was being built for the Ritters.

He said to Buck, "You can have them stop work on that cabin. I'm chasin' Sally and Pa Ritter away from this water hole. They's a heap more room up at the big house."

He glanced sideways at the girl, "Sally, I'm askin' you, will you come and live with me in the big house. For many years I have had no time or

thought for a woman. I know now, darling, it was only because I had not met the right woman."

"Van, just what are you trying to say?"

"In my own crude way I'm trying to tell you that I'm very much in love with you. As soon as you are rested we can ride into Pain Rock. It's about time the Potlatch had a mistress."

Buck Lansing snorted with disgust. "I seen it comin' from the very first day," he said. "I knowed it wouldn't be long till I'd have to move out to the bunkhouse with the rest of the boys."

GUNSMOKE IN COFFIN CORNERS

(Continued from page 91)

fair lookin' lug like you don't know anything 'bout wimmin yet? Yuh hafta say lots of gooeey things and honey up to 'em. Make 'em think they're gettin' a bargain. Why I remember one time down in El Paso when I lost my roll in one of them honky tonks."

Dave never heard any more of the old man's story. By the time Silver Face had said honky tonk, Dave had plucked Katy's shoe from the dresser drawer and was knocking on the door of Room 13.

She let him in and asked solemnly, "Did you come back to bark at me some more. Mr. Patterson?"

"The name's Dave," he said softly as if comforting a child. "I'm sorry about the way I acted. I always was a bit touchy. Those things I said were spoken in anger."

For a brief moment she stared at him in silence, those long lashes not flicking. Finally her gaze broke and she said, "Sit down, Dave, and tell me

what's troubling you. Sometimes women are good listeners."

Ten minutes later, Dave leaned back in his chair. He had gone over the story from beginning to end. Somehow, he felt that Katy could be trusted even though she appeared to be on the other side of the fence.

"What can I do?" Katy asked.

"Tell me who sent you to take me for a walk. I've a hunch it might tie in with the bill-of-sale."

"I suppose you'd pay well for that information?" Dave nodded that he would. "That's the only way I've ever worked," she continued. "Big money for cheap tricks. I think I'll turn over a new leaf though, and play this one straight. Don't ask me why. Maybe it's those big shoulders."

Katy drew a deep breath, then began. "Lou Jaccliffe is the man who sent me after you. He paid me a hundred in advance. Don't look so surprised. I've done it before. Innocent Kate, he calls

me. That ought to be good for a laugh."

Dave watched those long lashes lower over dark green eyes as if trying to brush away a tear. It was funny, but he didn't feel much like laughing right now. "How much do you want?" he asked.

Katy took a handkerchief from her sleeve and wiped her eyes, then threw her head back and said proudly, "My shoe, that's all."

SHIFTING uneasily in his chair, Dave felt a tingling sensation going through him and his pulse quicken. When it seemed to reach a definite pounding, he knelt in front of her and removed her fluffy bedroom slippers and slipped the shoe in his hand onto her foot. Standing up, he said, "Shall I call your coach now, Cinderella?"

She stood up beside him and smiled. "I'll show you how to get into Jacliffe's office as soon as I put on my other shoe."

Together they climbed the rickety back stairway of the Golden Garter Saloon. A row of windows opening out to the alley cut black squares in the peeled paint. Two steps from the top Katy stopped. "This window," she said in a whisper.

Glancing up at the window, Dave said, "I'll hoist you up." Wrapping his arms around her knees, he lifted her up to the window level. A moment later she called down. "It's unlocked."

After Katy crawled through the window, Dave jumped up and grabbed the sill and pulled himself through the opening. Swiftly and silently they rifled the drawers of Jacliffe's desk and file cabinet.

Finding nothing, Katy whispered, "It must be in the safe. That's where he keeps his little strong box of important papers."

Dave ran his fingers over the safe in the corner. It stood about three feet high and had a combination lock built into the door. "I'll have to get Jacliffe to open it," Dave said.

Katy grabbed his arm. "You can't go downstairs and get him. Not now. You wouldn't have a chance. His men would pick you off before you could get to him."

"I'll take you back to the hotel," he said. "If Silver Face is still in my room, tell him where I am."

Dave walked with her to the front of the hotel then turned back to the Golden Garter. He stopped outside the batwings and unconsciously his hand clamped over the butt of his six-shooter.

"Patterson," a gruff voice said behind him. Dave wheeled and felt the breeze of a fist flying past his ear. The hand on the butt of his gun drove viciously into the man's belly, caving him in. His left came up and made a wide arc before landing with a dull thud on the man's neck. Rudely, the man's face kissed the rough planks of the boardwalk as Dave pivoted and thrust himself through the slatted doors.

INSIDE, he knifed his way swiftly between the crowded card tables to the bar. Jacliffe wasn't there. Dave turned and surveyed the room. At last his gaze came to rest on the man he was looking for, standing behind the roulette wheel calling for bets. Roughly, he shouldered his way between players to the roulette table.

"Why, Mr. Patterson," Jacliffe exclaimed. "I told you that all men were gamblers. How big a stack you buying?"

"I'm not buying, I'm taking. You!" Dave declared flatly.

Jacliffe's dark brows knitted and his lips drew together. "I'm afraid I don't understand," he said while trying to appear unbothered by Dave's remark.

"Close up the game and I'll explain."

One of Jacliffe's hands began to slide from the table but Dave's voice stopped it at the edge. "I've got my holster tipped and its looking straight at your belly," he warned.

"What do you want, Patterson?"

"I want a bill-of-sale for a herd of white faces."

"What bill. . ."

"Lead the way to your office and I'll show you," Dave cut in.

Laying the little strong box on his desk, Jacliffe said. "Legally, those are my cows. They were sold to me by your partner and there isn't a court in the West that won't back me up."

Dumping the box contents out on the desk while keeping his gun leveled at Jacliffe, Dave said, "You forgot one thing."

"So did you," came a voice from the doorway behind Dave. "Drop that plow handle and get over against the wall," the voice ordered.

Dave recognized the voice as the one belonging to the man outside the saloon. Dropping his gun, he moved toward the wall reluctantly. At the third step a bullet shattered the window and plunged into the man at the door.

Simultaneously, Jacliffe and Dave both dived for the gun on the floor. Dave's big frame slammed into the lighter Jacliffe in mid-air. The gambler landed on one side of the desk and Dave on the other. Quickly, both regained their feet and went clawing for the gun again.

With a mighty heave, Dave tipped the desk in front of Jacliffe and sent him sprawling again. The wiry gambler raised to one knee in a daze. Baring his teeth, he snarled at Dave through broken lips. "I'm going to whittle you down to my size, Patterson."

Drawing a knife from his vest, Jacliffe rushed headlong for Dave with the blade cleaving the air in front of him. Ducking under the knife at the last moment, Dave heard the blade plunge into the window frame behind him. Like a panther, he sprung up and planted a heavy fist behind Jacliffe's ear and sent him sailing through the window into the darkness.

A few moments later the back door opened and a bearded old man entered. "Yuh know, Dave," Silver Face chuckled. "I just saw the funniest thing in my sixty years o' drifting. There's a feller out there in the alley who I swear has his head buried 'bout three inches in the dirt."

Slapping a paper with the backs of his fingers, Dave said. "At last. They're mine again, legally. Look at all these others. Jacliffe must have made a business of murder. Incidentally, thanks for being trigger happy this time."

"Trigger happy? Me?"

"Who? Katy?"

Silver Face hunched his shoulders. "I don't know what you're talkin' about."

As Dave bounded for the door, the old man's voice reined him in. "Wait a minute, son. Remember I told yuh I wanted to be yore *segundo*?"

Turning, Dave called back. "Let's go home, *segundo*."

Silver Face pulled at his whiskers and muttered something to himself as Dave hurried on ahead of him to the hotel. Dave knocked on the door of Room 13. Instantly, Katy opened it as if expecting him. "I just stopped by to thank you for helping me out. I didn't know you could shoot a rifle like that."

"I *can't* shoot a rifle," she answered.

Dave's expression of gratitude faded and a look of puzzlement came across his face.

Slowly the hard lines softened and happiness sparkled in his eyes as he realized that Silver Face wanted him to think that Katy was the one who fired the shot.

Smiling broadly, he said, "Silver Face and me need a cook and someone to hang curtains on the windows of our ranch house."

"I need a job," she said coming to him. Dave found that her lips were as soft as he'd always known they would be.

5

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BULLETS FOR A BUCKSKIN MAN

(Continued on page 99)

HE MOVED slightly, going down on his belly, and then he dragged himself to the edge of the cabin. He had lost his cap and that helped him, for he glanced around the corner. Evidently the man in the tower could not see him because of the cottonwood tree that was just beginning to leaf, there in the compound.

Dan waited, fighting pain. He wanted to put over the impression the bullet had killed him. Time ran on, his teeth clenched. Finally he saw what he wanted.

A rifle came out of the small window, waved to somebody on the ground. Raymond could not call his signal, so he was gesturing it to Harr Wilkins, somewhere in among the buildings. Dan caught a glimpse of dirty buckskin.

By this time, Dan LaRue was on one knee, rifle raised. He got in a quick uncertain shot, but he was used to quick shooting. His rifle spoke, moved back, and the patch of buckskin disappeared.

Dan jacked in a fresh shell, and cursed. He was not certain. And Raymond had no tongue to holler with. He might have hit him, and he might have missed. One thing was certain; he had to pull out.

He wished, suddenly, for the advantage of height. But his leg prohibited his climbing on a cabin. He knew, too, he would have to get Harr Wilkins fast, or his wounded leg would drag him down.

Already his vision was uncertain. Despite the pain, he sidled around a building, taking one great chance. And a rifle sent a ball into a log beside him. He saw the flame and smoke come from a building across the compound. He glimpsed the rifle.

He emptied his gun.

He knew, instinctively, he would not

last to make another stalk. He was a wounded lion, torn by the claws and jaws of a grizzly, and he knew his limitations, the way a cougar knows his boundaries of strength and stamina.

The rifle went back.

He hobbled across the clearing, and to him it seemed he ran fast, but he was a gut-shot lion, hobbling. He broke into the door, smashing against it, and no fire came either from the look-out station, or inside the building.

He crashed in, almost falling, and caught himself, steadying himself against the wall. He looked at Harr Wilkins, lying there, rifle beyond his hands, and then he looked at Sharon O'Donell, who stood in the back-door with a pistol.

"How did you get here?"

"I couldn't let you fight it alone. I got this pistol from the store. I came in behind. Your leg, Dan?"

Dan watched facets of light dance in her red hair. "I'll live, Sharon." She was not making her bluff work. Her voice was too unsteady. "Did you kill him? I never heard a shot."

"He was stumbling away from the window, Dan. He saw me, tried to raise his rifle— Then he fell."

"He dead?"

"Yes."

The squaw came in, shuffling. "That other, he dead. You good shot, Dan. He dead, in look-out."

Dan nodded. He was glad Sharon hadn't had to kill Harr Wilkins. A woman shouldn't have blood on her hands. He walked outside, feeling stronger.

Sharon said, "We'll give dad a Christian burial, Dan. He would want us to continue runnin' his tradin'-post. You an' me, together. Dan, are you listenin'?"

"I sure am."

The squaw watched, eyes small, bright. Finally she mumbled, "This no place for me."

She walked toward the store.

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GUNS MAKE THE NEWS

(Continued from page 109)

IT WAS the whine of a hinge, and not the savory odor of coffee that awakened Grimes. A draft was opening the office door. A dead cigar scented the cold air.

When Grimes' feet smacked to the floor, he had a gun in each hand. Though the lamp was behind him, his sudden move offset some of the disadvantage. Guns blazed. Lead tore his vest, and raked his ribs, but he poured lead at the flashes from the main door.

There was a thud, a groan, a threshing in the murky gray outside. Despite the volley which swept the broad entrance, Grimes shouldered the door, and slammed the bolt home. He mounted his desk, and squinted out through the narrow slot.

When it was light enough for him to distinguish the men who crouched in the mouth of the alley, across the street, he reached for Amy's Winchester, and drew a fine bead on the white blob of a Stetson.

Half an hour later, Judge Hassler came from a doorway and waved a white handkerchief as he crossed the street.

"Simon, what was the idea of shooting at those men?"

"What in tunket was the idee them sneaking up on me?"

"They were looking for Homer Dale. Don't say he's not there; I can see the tracks of the rubber tires."

"And he's staying here till I get the paper printed up and dished out."

"Oh, damn the paper! We want the tax books."

"Tax books?"

Homer's office is a boar's nest, and the books are gone, and he's gone, and his buggy is gone. You've got them."

"Come in and get 'em!"

"We'll stay here till kingdom come, we'll starve you out."

"That last is sure gospel, jedge. But I'm staying, and so's that lilac-smelling

assessor. I'll eat his hoss, and then him"

Hassler wheeled and went to join the besiegers. In an hour he returned "Simon, here's a poke with a thousand dollars in gold, I'll fling it in, and you count it. Keep it. Walk out, leave town peaceably. Dale is your security against anyone drygulching you."

"How about driving out?"

"With those books in the buggy? You stay and starve."

Grimes put his chair on top the desk, so that he could catch a few winks and yet be ready to open fire at the first alarm.

After twelve hours of hell, the shadows lengthened, and Grimes said to Dale, "I'm going out with them books. You're driving, with the top down, I'll hang on behind, scrunched down under the top so they can't smoke me out without drilling you."

He took the robe, a waste basket, a length of stovepipe, and some paper to fix up a dummy which he crowned with his Stetson.

"Long as they think it's me setting next to you, they don't shoot, and as long as you keep that hoss hightailing, I don't plug you."

It was dark outside, and darker within. Grimes, darting to the rear, doubled his lean frame into a pretzel shape that was hidden by the lowered top of the buggy. Dale croaked, "It's me, don't shoot, he's got me covered!"

AS THEY cleared the outskirts of Broken Axe, Grimes let go, rolling over flint and through mesquite.

Grimes looped back to town. At the deserted livery stable, he flung a saddle on his horse. He had nothing to do now but get the bulky books, which had never left the *Gazette* office, dab a loop about them, and ride like hell.

He charged into the 'dobe, seized his prize, and wheeled out. Amy's Cafe was

dark. Well, he'd write Amy. Right now, he had to see a man, and in a hurry—

And then he heard the drumming of hooves. Men yelled, and pistols blazed.

He swerved, right angling from the wagon trail. No grub, but he'd drunk plenty at the horse trough. He plied his quirt. There was still a chance.

Guns blazing, the riders swooped down the main street. Far out in the desert in the opposite quarter, there were flashes of fire, and yells.

The shooting in Broken Axe subsided. The sudden silence reminded him of a former raid. There were shouted questions and then came answers from cover. Amos Barstow had come to town. Grimes plied his meat-hooks, and went larruping back again.

"Jest the man I been looking for," he called to the bearded rider who loomed up in the glow of a saloon front. "Got a passel of books for you!"

"Books!" Barstow boomed, and wheeled his long-legged mount.

Amy, dusty and bedraggled, swayed in the saddle. Grimes caught her, and she clung to him. "When they bottled you up," she hold him, "I got a horse and headed for Poison Wells, to show Amos that paper you printed up."

"Some more of Amos' riders, they heard the noise and thought they'd see what was what, just in case. The rest of us kept on to town."

"Looks like you got suthin to win the election with, Mistah Barstow. Tee-totally new administration for the hull dang county."

"Son, it wasn't exactly that," Barstow countered. "I figured it was news when an editor of the *Gazette* got the drop on a man and didn't smoke him out. Like the Good Book says, you done cast your bread on the waters, and—"

"Darling," she said, "there won't be enough of the judge's crowd coming back to town to make any trouble while we're all eating. And I bet the new editor makes the *Gazette* pay!"

"That's gospel, ma'am." Barstow cut in. "Go ahead and kiss him some more, we ain't hungry."

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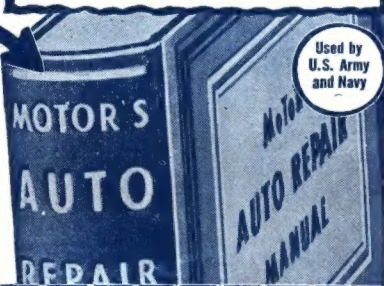


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